



Cornell University & Delaware
County Cooperative Extension

The Discovery Tool Project

*Catalyzing Positive Change in Rural Food &
Physical Activity Environments*



*"I think there's lots and lots of things available, but people don't
take advantage of them."*

Walton, NY (2013-2014)
Delaware County



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Catalyzing Positive Change in Rural Food & Physical Activity Environments

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INTRODUCTION

The Discovery Tool is a computerized environment assessment tool (app) programmed for use on an Android Tablet. The Discovery Tool is equipped with a series of audio instructions that prompt users to capture aspects of their environment that make it easier or more difficult to be physically active by taking photographs and audio narrations of their community. The Discovery Tool was developed by researchers at Stanford University and originally developed and tested for use in urban communities. Through a partnership with Stanford University, Cornell University, and Cornell Cooperative Extension, four communities throughout New York State were given the opportunity to test this tool in rural settings. With the assistance of six community members, the Discovery Tool project was carried out in Walton, NY. The community members were asked to conduct two walks using

the Discovery Tool. The first walk focused on capturing barriers and facilitators to physical activity within Walton. The second walk continued to focus on capturing aspects of the physical activity environment, but also documented the strengths and weaknesses of the food environment. A focus group was assembled following the completion of the second walk. The focus group sought to further explore the barriers and assets to physical activity and healthy eating within the community; brainstorm and generate ideas for community improvement based upon the information collected in the Discovery Tool; and collect feedback on the overall use of the Discovery Tool.

The photographs contained in this report were taken by community members while using the Discovery Tool.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND HEALTHY EATING ASSETS



PARKS, PLAYGROUNDS, AND RECREATIONAL AREAS

There are numerous amenities in Walton that promote physical activity for community members of all ages. *“For a small town, we do have a lot of parks and recreation.”* In the warmer months, the west branch of the Delaware River is available for canoeing, kayaking, tubing, and fishing. Residents also felt that Launt Pond was a beautiful location and a great place to walk, paddleboat, or canoe. *“You can get a lot of great outdoor activities, you can picnic along the river, walk along the river, there’s paths in certain areas. You can go canoeing and fishing.”*



Walton has a number of parks including Oslo Lincoln Park, where there is a free pool and summer swim lessons for children and adults, as well as cross-training stations placed at intervals around the perimeter of the park. Bassett Park playground and the school playground both have equipment on which younger children enjoy playing. A small park across from the library has benches for residents to rest on during a walk (though this is not a common amenity throughout town). A basketball court and a baseball field are available for pick-up games. During the colder months, the town uses a portion of the local park for skiing.

The local fairgrounds are utilized year-round for physical activity purposes. In the summer, residents use it as a place to go walking and to play golf and, in the winter, as a place to ski. During the annual fair, over 200 bicycles are given to local children. Combined, these assets allow Walton residents to be active year-round.

SIDEWALKS, CROSSWALKS, AND STREET LIGHTS

While participants felt that there is room for improvement, there was unanimous appreciation for the sidewalks and crosswalks that are available and especially for the ones that have recently been replaced. Sidewalks offer safe walking routes and participants reported that they were glad that there were street lights in some places so that community members felt safe walking in the morning and evening. *“There is a crosswalk with a button where you can push to cross it, which is great.”*



OPTIONS FOR WALKERS

In addition to the sidewalks and parks, residents are allowed to walk in the school hallways. This is a particularly nice option when there is inclement weather.

FITNESS CENTER & DANCE CLASSES

For more structured physical activity, Walton has a fitness center that residents can pay to use. *“This is a new, wonderful addition that we’ve got on the main street in Walton, it’s the Walton Fitness...there is a lot of people that come in here.”* There is also a fitness center at the hospital, but participants were uncertain whether it was available to all residents; it may only be for those with doctors’ permission. A new dance studio also offers physical activity opportunities for children and adults. There are Zumba classes, aerobic classes, yoga classes, and others. For couples that like to dance, there is also ballroom dancing at the New Hope Community Church.



SEASONAL ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOODS

Participants also noted a number of community assets related to healthy eating. These included a farmers' market set to come to town in July 2014 in front of the hospital, a couple of farm stands that sell fresh produce, and a few U-pick farms where locals can go to pick their own produce.



COMMUNITY NUTRITION AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PROGRAMS

Walton also boasts a variety of community programs aimed at improving nutrition for its residents. At The Grange, residents can take cooking classes and learn how to cook healthy meals. The county's Cooperative Extension also leads a number of programs including a weekly feeding program for the elderly at a local senior daycare. Extension is also to thank for bringing the above-mentioned farmers' market to town. There is also the Methodist church, which feeds over 100 children each day during lunch in the summer, and the food bank housed within the local Presbyterian Church, which provides free food to local low-income individuals and families. *"This [First United Methodist Church] is the home of the summer lunch program where some days they feed well over 100+ children during the day. Also the site of many, many, many church dinners."* In the summer, excess produce from local farms is sometimes donated for these individuals and families to take along with the other food items. There is also a popular after-school physical activity program for girls in grades three to five called Girls on the Run. The girls spend three months practicing to run their first 5K race, which is meant to instill in them an appreciation for being active.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND HEALTHY EATING BARRIERS

INACCESSIBLE RAILWAY TRAIL

A frustrating barrier to physical activity for some participants was the inaccessible railway trail. A few local farmers do not want trespassers on their section of the trail and have placed gates at either end of the area they own. While participants understood that four-wheelers were a concern, they felt that, if the trail were to be redeveloped, it could become a great asset to the town and the surrounding area, particularly for walkers and bikers and for those who live out of town and would like a safe passage into the downtown area.



DETERIORATING ROADS, SIDEWALKS, AND CROSSWALKS

A common barrier to physical activity discussed by participants was the deteriorating roads and sidewalks in some sections of town and a lack of crosswalks (or lack of crosswalk enforcement) in numerous high-traffic locations. The group also discussed areas where no sidewalks were present, making it even more difficult to walk through town safely. *"If you wanted to walk out of the village out towards Franklin..." "There's no place." "You're risking your life." "...it's safer to drive because there are no sidewalks."*



TOWN NOT BIKER FRIENDLY

Though biking is a great source of physical activity and the local fair provides numerous children with bikes each year, participants did not feel the town is bike-friendly. Participants had legitimate concerns about their safety when biking in and around town. *"People don't pay any attention to bikes." "Many of our drivers are not courteous to bikers."*

RURAL RESIDENCE

For those that do not live right in town, distance is a barrier to both healthy eating and physical activity. *"Barrier for me is I live eight miles out of town and I would have to drive into town to do anything."* Walking or biking into town is an unappealing and unsafe option for those that live outside the town limits. This limits not only the physical activity they can do in their area, but also their access to assets in Walton. *"It's a busy road and there are no sidewalks where I am...Everybody drives 65 miles an hour."*



LIMITED HEALTHY RESTAURANT OPTIONS

A common observation among participants was the lack of healthy restaurants and healthy meal options. *"I noted that there really are not very many healthy eating choices." "We have a hot dog stand, a Chinese restaurant, a McDonald's, a greasy diner, a pizzeria, and one restaurant that maybe has healthy food choices." "You would have to work at it to choose healthy in most of the places."* While some of these restaurants do have salad options or lean meats on the menu, they may use only iceberg lettuce or cook the meats in an unhealthy manner (for example, frying). Danny's was mentioned specifically as a place that does offer healthy options. The Penguin was also mentioned as a restaurant that has healthy options. *"She has wonderful salads."* Unfortunately, eating at these healthier places is considered more expensive than going to McDonald's or Top Dog.

SEASONALITY AND COST OF PRODUCE

Many of the community assets related to healthy eating are only available on a seasonal basis. In general, participants felt that the cost of produce is *"much higher"* in Walton. *"The melon is \$4 and...it's not even good."* In the summer, the cost of certain produce items are cheaper for community members due to the variety of shopping options, but the prices at the Big M do not necessarily change to reflect seasonality. *"They mark [produce] up at least 100%; as we've sold stuff to them."*

POOR ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOODS AT LOCAL GROCER

The Big M is the only major grocery store in town, so there is a “*lack of competition*” and most participants do not find the quality of their produce to be satisfactory. *“I hate their produce.” “Below average as far as produce.” “Your lettuce usually has brown all through it.”* Other concerns were their limited fat-free options



and lack of fresh seafood. In order to access higher quality and better variety of foods, participants talked about driving to neighboring towns to grocery shop. *“If we really want to have something that we can’t get at the Big M we will get in the car and we drive to Oneonta.”*

SUGGESTIONS

RESTORE THE HEART HEALTHY MILE

During their walk through the town, participants were disappointed to discover that the signs marking the route for the Heart Healthy Mile had all been taken down. The Mile was viewed as a “*really nice*” asset and the group hoped that the Mile could be restored. In addition to new signs, participants noted that certain parts of the course were destroyed due to recent floods and needed work.

ADD BIKE LANES AND/OR RESTORE RAIL TRAIL

As discussed above, participants feel the community is not biker friendly and that there are some options for making it more so. One participant pointed out that *“We don’t have a bike lane.”* If feasible, bike lanes would be helpful additions to major roadways in the community. Another option would be to restore the rail trail for public use, though this would involve private owners selling their portions to the town for the public good and ensuring that four-wheelers do not have access.

CHARGE FOR THE SWIMMING POOL

Some participants felt that charging non-residents for use of the local pool may be one change that could be made to local policy. While local residents pay via taxes, out-of-town visitors do not contribute to the pool’s maintenance. Any excess funds earned could potentially be used toward other projects identified through this work and other community initiatives.

PROVIDE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Some participants felt that the community should do more to educate residents on healthy lifestyle choices and to teach the skills necessary to make those choices. *“I do think there are people that don’t really understand. They really just don’t get the concept of how vitally important your food is.”* Others felt that it was not education that was lacking; it was lack of motivation and time. *“I think they’re aware. I just think they don’t care.” “It’s faster and people don’t have time.”*

RECONSIDER PLANS FOR A NEW PARK

Participants disclosed that, at one point, there were plans to build a park across the river and that those plans included a walking bridge to connect the two sides of town. This was viewed as a “*wonderful idea*,” particularly since there is currently only one bridge for pedestrians to use.

REJUVENATE STORE FRONTS AND SIDEWALKS

During one of the walks through town, one of the participants sadly pointed out “*another crumbling building*.” The group felt the town as a whole is in decline and wished work could be done to restore the community, particularly storefronts and sidewalks in the main areas of town. These renovations, while potentially costly, would make the community more welcoming, which would encourage both residents and visitors to stop and walk around the community.

