



After the Fire: Mendota Rebuilds Stronger with a \$3 Million Infrastructure Grant

When devastating downtown fires struck Mendota, Illinois in 2022, community leaders transformed crisis into opportunity, securing over \$3 million in infrastructure funding within months of completing the National Association of Chronic Disease Directors' (NACDD) 2024 Active People, Healthy IllinoisSM Walkability Virtual Academy (WVA) – a virtual adaptation of the Walkability Action Institute (WAI).



The WAI brings together cross-disciplinary teams representing public health, planning, transportation, elected officials, and other disciplines to participate in an intensive, applied-learning course on improving walkability with a focus on community and transportation design.

Turning Grief into Grassroots Power

Determined to move forward, community leaders secured a \$10,000 Community Heart and Soul grant and launched a large community outreach effort that engaged over 1,700 residents—nearly 25% of Mendota's 7,061 population.

Organizers took conversations directly to farmer's markets, neighborhood meetings, and existing community events. The responses were notably consistent: residents felt safe in Mendota's rural setting but couldn't safely walk anywhere due to missing, broken, or incomplete sidewalks. This feedback became the data foundation that strengthened every subsequent grant application.

Building an Unconventional Dream Team

When the Illinois Public Health Institute announced the WVA opportunity, Mendota faced a challenge: the community lacked traditional planning staff. The solution was uniquely grassroots, drawing on educational and community networks to recruit across sectors.

Organizers started with institutions for credibility—partnering with the regional medical center and school system—then expanded to passionate community members. The team of 17 participants included educators, city staff, health professionals, and, crucially, residents with disabilities whose lived experience was invaluable to the planning process.

Equipped with community data and WVA training, the team implemented a strategic, phased approach – building on early wins to secure larger investments. Their first major success came through Safe Routes to School grants, where they accomplished something rarely seen at the national level: securing both infrastructure (\$250,000) and non-infrastructure (\$100,000) grants at the same time. **The key to their biggest success—a \$3 million Illinois Transportation Enhancement Program grant—came through the relationships formed as part of the WVA experience.** When preparing the complex application, the team contacted state members from the WVA for technical assistance, which played a critical role in securing the award.

Through additional funding streams, the community built grant-writing and management skills within local government – enabling coordination of 16 grants totaling nearly **\$10 million in just one year.**



Students as Infrastructure Researchers

Perhaps the most innovative aspect was integrating students into walkability assessments. Through WVA connections, an eighth-grade teacher learned about University of Illinois Chicago's Project Sidewalk program and trained students in infrastructure vocabulary and assessment techniques. Equipped with wheelchairs, strollers, and walkers, students carried out systematic walking audits across the city. Their work went beyond education – data they collected was shared directly with engineering consultants funded by grants and used to guide infrastructure improvement priorities.

Transforming City Operations from the Inside

The WVA training fundamentally changed how Mendota approached infrastructure planning. Before the training, city maintenance staff operated reactively without considering broader connectivity or accessibility issues. The change became visible in routine operations. When the city repaved streets, crews began systematically installing proper curb cuts rather than just addressing

immediate areas. City staff also began implementing traffic management strategies at recreational areas— creative approaches that the walkability training helped inspire. The approach extends to community-wide ownership.

"We as a community have to do all this together. It can't just be the city's gonna fix the problems," emphasized city leadership.

Regular coordination with WVA team members ensures ongoing projects benefit from a wide range of perspectives. The collaborative foundation has enabled Mendota to leverage walkability success into broader community development, with projects now incorporating accessibility, walking, and biking into downtown revitalization, youth programming, and economic development initiatives.

As construction begins on the \$3 million bike path in 2026, Mendota's experience offers concrete lessons: transform crisis into community engagement opportunity, build various teams with authentic representation, leverage training relationships for technical assistance, integrate all community members as genuine partners, and make improvements permanent by changing how things work.

The path from devastating fires to transformational investment demonstrates how strategic planning, authentic community engagement, and prioritized capacity building can yield remarkable results when communities commit to collaborative action and sustained implementation.



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