



▲ Downtown Batesville, once riddled with empty storefronts, sprang back to life after pedestrian improvements were made.

This Town is Being Made for Walking, Hiking & Strolling

As a physical education teacher at Batesville Middle School for 20 years, Rick Elumbaugh got a pretty clear picture of his community's future—and was concerned by some of what he saw.

Many of the students he taught headed off to college or the military, and never looked back. “One boy who took my mountain biking class in 2004 is a case in point. Completed college in Little Rock, medical degree at the University of Missouri in Columbia, and now we’ve lost him,” he told Ian Thomas, state and local program director at [America Walks](#). “He loves the bike trails and vibrant downtown lifestyle too much to come back.”

“Our Main Street was dying,” Elumbaugh says. The community lacked gathering spots where people could run into friends or get to know other folks.

“And the health of young men and women was an issue,” he adds. “Some can’t even pass the physical to get into the military. All this drove me to run for mayor.”

Elumbaugh viewed walking and outdoor recreation as one solution to these problems, and made it a theme of his 2007 campaign, which he won with 70 percent of the vote in this town of 10,000 in north-eastern Arkansas. He went to work immediately to

Batesville

Walkscore

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Walk to work

4.1%

Population density
per square mile

946

Non-white population

9.4%

Median household income

\$37,150

Households below
poverty level

17%

transform the community, drawing on the same discipline and sense of purpose he instilled in a generation of Batesville 8th graders.

Making walking safe, convenient & enjoyable

One of his first actions was an ordinance requiring sidewalks in all new residential developments, followed by construction of 4 miles of sidewalks along the highway running through town, where many businesses are located. Deteriorating sidewalks in the historic

downtown district were also rebuilt to encourage more people to get out and move.

Batesville already had a popular riverfront walking trail, which became the starting point for the new 2-mile Greenway trail serving two schools. This fall a new community and recreation center opens along the Greenway, with an indoor track and aquatic center as well as ballfields. A half-mile Greenway extension is in the works to expand the popular walking and biking network to reach another school.

“Greenways are a quality-of-life issue,” the mayor declares. “From sunup to sundown you see people on it. I hit the trail about five days a week, and last year I ran into one of the city mechanics on it. I’d never seen him on the trail before. He had a defibrillator strapped on to him, and told me the doctors said he needed to lose 100 pounds.”

“I saw him again a few months later, and I didn’t even recognize him—he had to call out to me. He said he’d lost a lot of weight by walking and diet.”



▲ Gym teacher Rick Elumbaugh ran for mayor because he worried about how few young people were staying in town.

The push to make walking safer, easier and more fun in Batesville is also bringing life back to the downtown. “Walkability is part of our business strategy,” explains Elumbaugh. “It’s about making a healthier community, but also an economically vibrant community.”

Four years ago, about half the storefronts on Main Street were empty—now it’s only 5 percent, after a concerted effort to enhance the area’s appeal for pedestrians. Buildings are under construction downtown for the first time since the 1970s, and a sidewalk café has appeared along with a small business incubator, Mexican restaurant, coffee shop, flower shop, yogurt shop, bakery and two hair salons. A shuttered opera house will reincarnate as a performing arts venue/event center, and the library is looking at a move into a landmark 1903 building.

The positive changes for Batesville go beyond just commerce. “I can look out my window in City Hall, and see people strolling down the street, including young families pushing baby strollers. We are beginning to see some of the young millennials coming to town.”

Joel Williams, 32, who worked in the film business in New Orleans and Los Angeles, is one of them. Love, not walkability, was the primary reason for his move, but he’s enthusiastic about living and raising a family in Batesville. “It’s a great place where you can get to know everybody just going down the street. So much is happening here.”



▲ Retired Navy Admiral Bob Carius (with shovel) help steer the downtown revival.

Resuscitating Main Street

Elumbaugh is quick to point out that city officials can't revitalize a town all by themselves. They must work shoulder-to-shoulder with citizens and business owners. One of the mayor's chief allies is Bob Carius, an 87-year-old retired Navy admiral, who is president of Main Street Batesville, a nonprofit business and community partnership.

"We're the oldest city in Arkansas with many beautiful old houses, but the downtown was slowly becoming a slum area because of all the vacant buildings," Carius recalls. "We are shifting that because people came together to make it happen."

The first step in this turnaround was bringing in a pair of community vitality experts for a brainstorming session: Dan Burden of Blue Zones, who's worked in more than 3500 towns across North America; and Ian Thomas of America Walks, who is also a city council member in Columbia, Missouri.

Thomas remembers the mayor explaining to them, "Decades of trying to accommodate automobiles had made Main Street inhospitable—even hostile—to pedestrians, and that the city would need to reverse that trend in order to bring back its former vibrancy."

Carius felt the same way. "We had to do something dramatic to show people we meant business about changing Main Street."

And that's exactly what's happening, thanks to ideas first voiced by residents at a public workshop. Main Street is being narrowed from two one-way lanes to one, with the extra space used to enhance the streetscape with greenery, lampposts and traditional angle parking. Stoplights were removed, and curbs are being widened at intersections to make it safer to cross. The street meanders a bit, with the parking shifting from one side to the other through the five-block downtown. One block is already done with three more under construction now, and fundraising underway to finance the final block.

Mayor Elumbaugh notes that walking downtown is immeasurably more pleasant now that average vehicle speeds have downshifted from 25 mph to 10 mph, with through traffic moving to adjacent streets. "The plan has 70 percent public approval," he says proudly. "There's no resistance from the merchants at all. Some of the old generation doesn't like it, but everyone else does."

"Opposition has all but dispersed except for one woman who just berates me constantly about taking out the stoplights," Carius adds. "But I saw her husband recently and he told me you can actually travel faster even though you drive slower now because the stoplights are gone."

"We conceived this as an economic development project that will attract millennials to live here and tourists to visit," he adds. "It's fortuitous that it's good for public health and that the people who live near downtown like it so much."

What we can learn from Batesville

Keep costs down

The low pricetag of the downtown transformation curbed opposition, notes Bob Carius, a retired Navy admiral and president of the Main Street Batesville partnership. At about \$20,000 a block, it was not necessary to use tax money. Grants, civic organizations, business owners and individuals paid for it. Local banks even chipped in to bring walkability experts to town. At first, the new community and recreation center was rejected by voters in a 2010 referendum, but passed two years later after the budget was trimmed and a more strenuous campaign staged to trumpet its benefits.

Make it easy for city officials to do the right thing

If you want major change in your community, Carius counsels, “Don’t make the city council do it all on their own. You need to protect elected officials by getting civic groups behind the plans too. We had people from 19 different groups working on the downtown streetscape plan, which we ourselves presented to the city council.”

Engage your opponents

Mayor Rick Elumbaugh advises speaking directly with skeptics of walkability plans. “Show them the statistics about walking and health. Reach out to national groups that can help you make the case—that really helped us here.”

Mobilize young people

Most of all, Elumbaugh adds, “Get young people involved. They’re great advocates. The millennials want to walk and have more places to walk to—that’s what attracts young families. I’ve had a few of my old students come back because of how we are rebuilding the community.”

—JAY WALLJASPER

▼ Batesville’s Greenway Trail will soon connect the riverfront with three schools and a new recreation center.

