

## Article by: Amy Ford-Wagner Planner with the Oahu Metropolitan Planning Organization

### What Can Honolulu Learn from Atlanta? Lessons from the 2017 Walkability Action Institute

In early April, having won a national competition, an intergovernmental team from Honolulu took the long flight to Atlanta for the 2017 Walkability Action Institute. This institute, now in its third year, is put together by the National Association for Chronic Disease Directors and sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control with a goal of linking transportation planning and public health outcomes.

*Oahu's team members were Hawaii State Department of Health staff Heidi Hansen-Smith and Danielle Schaeffner; Councilmember Brandon Elefante (Aiea/Pearl City/Waipahu); City/County of Honolulu Complete Streets Administrator Michael Packard; Hawaii Bicycling League Director of Advocacy Daniel Alexander, and Oahu Metropolitan Planning Organization planner Amy Ford-Wagner.*

The purpose of this Institute is to establish an action plan to pursue large-scale policy, systemic, or environmental changes in our respective communities. Oahu was one of ten regions selected to participate in this year's conference.

The Institute was comprehensive, with course faculty from academia, the public sector, non-profits, and the private sector, representing expertise on ways to enhance walkability in communities from public health, equity, engineering, and other perspectives.

Leslie Meehan, State of Tennessee Department of Public Health, kicked off the first day of lectures by describing how the Nashville area MPO determined that it could save money on health care spending if it allocated an increasing share of its transportation funding to active transportation projects.

From Ian Lockwood, an engineer with Toole Design Group, we learned how measures of effectiveness have evolved from conventional measures of traffic level of

*We joined nine other teams, hailing from Cleveland, TN; Southern Cook County, IL; Corridor, IA; Duluth, MN; Flint, MI; Mansfield, OH; Puget Sound, WA; Rochester, NY; and Tulsa, OK.*

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service during peak hours only; to measures that emphasize safer speeds, levels of stress and comfort for people walking and biking, aesthetics, and counting people rather than vehicles.

Charles Brown of Rutgers University and Amy Rauworth of the Lakeshore Foundation discussed how to create truly inclusive walkable communities by paying community members to attend input meetings rather than paying consultants to give answers and by ensuring that barriers to walkability consider all levels of ability.

We wrapped up the first day by splitting up into teams and doing Walk Audits of different areas of Decatur. As we walked, we considered four questions:

- Does the land use allow for different types of destinations?
- Is there a good quality, connected network of sidewalks, bike lanes, trails, and transit service?
- Does the site design put buildings at the sidewalk, allow for bike parking, and create an inviting and functional design?
- Finally, is it safe, accessible, and comfortable to walk around, with ADA facilities, safe crossings, and traffic speed and volume compatible with walking?

Our second day of training was just as packed as the first. Hugh Morris, Manager of the Smart Growth Program of the National Association of Realtors, discussed how the private sector is recognizing the value of walkability. With the largest population cohorts (Baby Boomers and Millennials) preferring smaller yards and walkable neighborhoods, realty sites such as Redfin prominently feature a listing's WalkScore. Mr. Morris concluded that realtors connect walkability and affordability and can be advocates for walkability.

Similarly, Peggy Merriss, City Manager of Decatur, explained how walkability was truly an economic development tool in her community; starting with the 1982 Town Center Plan, the community sought to connect residential neighborhoods to the downtown area. Today, Decatur is in the fifth phase of that plan.

Our second day also wrapped up with an active exercise in which we made our way to the new Beltline on a scavenger hunt. The idea of a Beltline - a multi-use trail running through the core of Atlanta and making use of a former rail line - originated with a Georgia Tech student's Masters thesis. Our Oahu team was given a list of items to find in the neighborhood during our scavenger hunt (i.e., wayfinding signs, bike lanes, signatures from bus operators, etc.). Our team found the most items and took first place out of all the teams!

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On the last day, tired from travel and long days of lectures, but energized by the new ideas and practical applications we'd learned, we all agreed it had been one of the most productive training events we had ever attended.

But we weren't finished yet: one of our commitments in our application was to write a Walkability Action Plan that drew on the lessons from Atlanta. We emphasized quick action with the funding of an Oahu Pedestrian Master Plan, followed by collaboration on data collection and performance measures, all centered on an inclusive approach that recognizes the need for equity throughout Oahu's diverse communities. We look forward to sharing the lessons learned with the larger planning community.



*The Oahu team Abbey Roads it in one of Decatur's decorative crosswalks.*

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*Mike cleans up the MARTA rail system!*



*Amy finds taking transit is a Breeze with an integrated bus-rail fare card.*

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*Hugh Morris explains how walkability affects the bottom line.*

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*Brandon and Danielle take a break from the scavenger hunt.*



*Daniel throws his whole being into measuring pedestrian facilities on the Atlanta Beltline.*