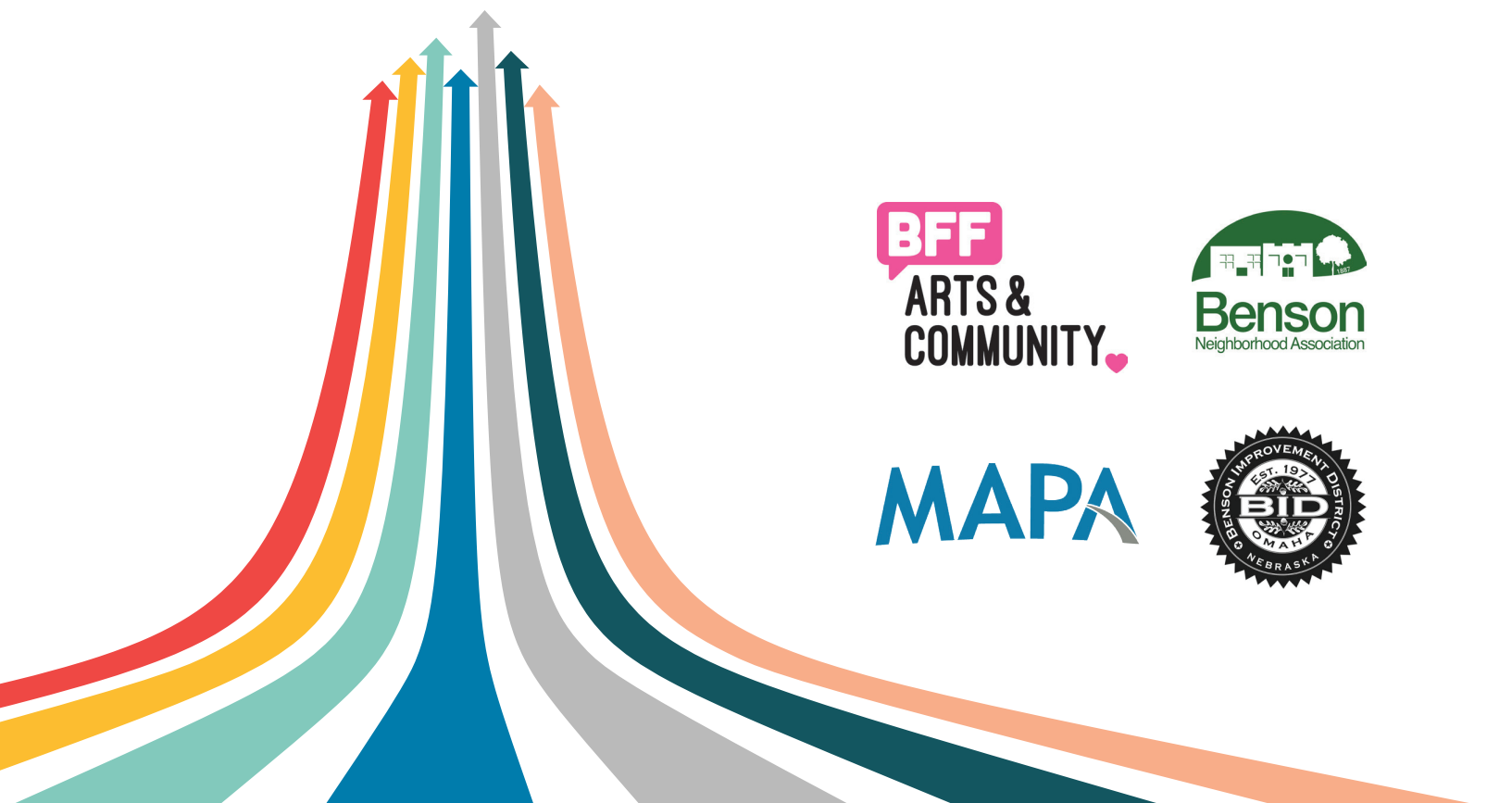




BLOCK TALK



BFF
ARTS &
COMMUNITY 


Benson
Neighborhood Association

MAPA 



Virtual Benson Block Talk

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MAPA's mission is to provide local governments with planning and technical support, thinking regionally and long range on the core issues that impact the vibrancy of the Greater Omaha-Council Bluffs area. Facilitating Block Talks is just one of many ways MAPA is here to promote vibrant places to live, work and play.



Background

Block Talks are a public engagement presentation that introduces stakeholders and citizens to the experience of a pedestrian or alternative transit rider on the built infrastructure of our communities. These are walk audits that are designed to help a neighborhood identify strengths and weaknesses of the infrastructure in an area and identify projects, programs, and policies that can be done to improve the built environment. Walks look at the sidewalk and road design and how it relates to businesses and activities along the street. Three different walks were set up, the first focusing on neighborhood interaction between the businesses and the street, the second focusing on the street design, and a third looking at the alleyways and parking opportunities around the main Benson corridor.

Participants were asked to rate each segment of street and specific stops that highlight some aspect of the area and give feedback. This feedback will then be shared with stakeholders and partners to confirm or update organizations who were considered to be responsible for the project, policy, or program related to the comment.

The Block Talks were conducted in partnership with the Nebraska Department of Transportation and the City of Omaha Traffic Engineering and Parking to identify safety projects to improve pedestrian and cyclist safety features and receive public comment on the Benson District Parking Study.

Partner Organizations

Benson BID

The Benson Business Improvement District is responsible for raising funds to maintain and improve the Benson business district. They hold regular meetings for local businesses, maintain a directory, events calendar, and newsletter. The BID works to provide members with funding for projects and improve the physical landscape of Benson including the streetscape.

Benson Neighborhood Association

The Benson Neighborhood Association strives to build community by connecting neighbors, fostering civic involvement, supporting business, and promoting a safe, vibrant neighborhood while celebrating our rich, diverse history.

BFF

BFF is a nonprofit founded to promote art and inclusion in Benson and Omaha as a whole. They are dedicated to creating spaces for art throughout Omaha by bringing artists, businesses, volunteers, organizations, and community together to create spaces through engagement and interaction.



City of Omaha Traffic Engineering and Maintenance

The mission of the City of Omaha Traffic Engineering Division is to provide for the safe, environmentally compatible, and efficient movement of pedestrians, bicyclists, and motor vehicles through the design, construction, operation, and maintenance of traffic control systems.

Traffic Engineering staff maintains 1,000 traffic signals, lane lights, and flashers, 2,850 lane miles painted (conducted annually), and 120,000 traffic signs. Traffic Engineering staff also conducts 350 traffic studies and counts traffic at 250 intersections per year. The division duties include planning and design of traffic facilities, reviewing development plans and plats as well as funding and administering 56,000 street lights.

Nebraska Department of Transportation

The mission of the Nebraska Department of Transportation (NDOT) is to provide the best possible statewide transportation system for the movement of goods and people. NDOT collaborates with local, state, and federal partners to improve roadway safety and reduce the number of fatal and serious injury crashes in Nebraska.

Federal Highway Administration - Nebraska Office

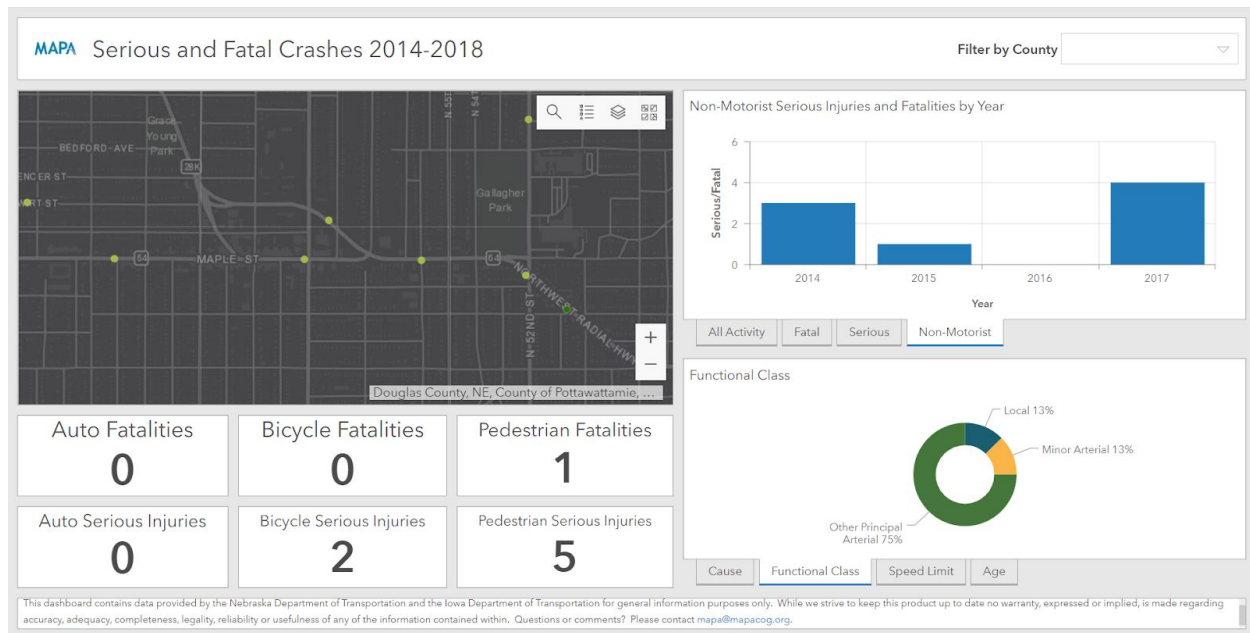
The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) Division Offices are local field offices that provide leadership, guidance, and direction to State Departments of Transportation in the project development and delivery of transportation projects. Working collaboratively with State partners, FHWA Division Offices ensure that the nation's roads, bridges and tunnels are safe and continue to support economic growth and environmental sustainability.

Addressing Pedestrian Safety

In the fall of 2019, MAPA began to work with the City of Omaha and the Nebraska Department of Transportation to facilitate public outreach to better understand pedestrian and bicycle traffic along the Maple Street corridor. In coordination with the Nebraska and Iowa Departments of Transportation and member communities, MAPA maintains a Safety Dashboard which displays fatal and suspected serious injuries within the region. The following figure shows pedestrian and bicyclist fatalities (dark green) and serious injuries (light green) in and around the Maple Street corridor in Benson.



Figure 1: MAPA Safety Dashboard | Pedestrian and Bicyclist Fatal and Serious Injuries



safety.mapacog.org

FHWA | Safe Transportation for Every Pedestrian Initiative

Under the Every Day Counts Initiative, FHWA is promoting the Safe Transportation for Every Pedestrian (STEP) process. The process provides tools and best practices for the “Systemic application of cost-effective countermeasures with known safety benefits can help reduce pedestrian fatalities at both uncontrolled and signalized crossing locations.”¹

The STEP Studio is an FHWA provided toolkit to assist municipalities in identifying appropriate countermeasures for improved pedestrian safety. Step 1 of this process is to **Collect Data and Engage the Public**. Of the six tasks under this step, this Block Talk has been conducted to 1.) *Request and Receive Public Input*, and 2.) *Conduct a Walkability Audit*.²

¹ FHWA. (2020). Center for Accelerating Innovation. Every Day Counts: Safe Transportation for Every Pedestrian. https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/innovation/everydaycounts/edc_5/step2.cfm

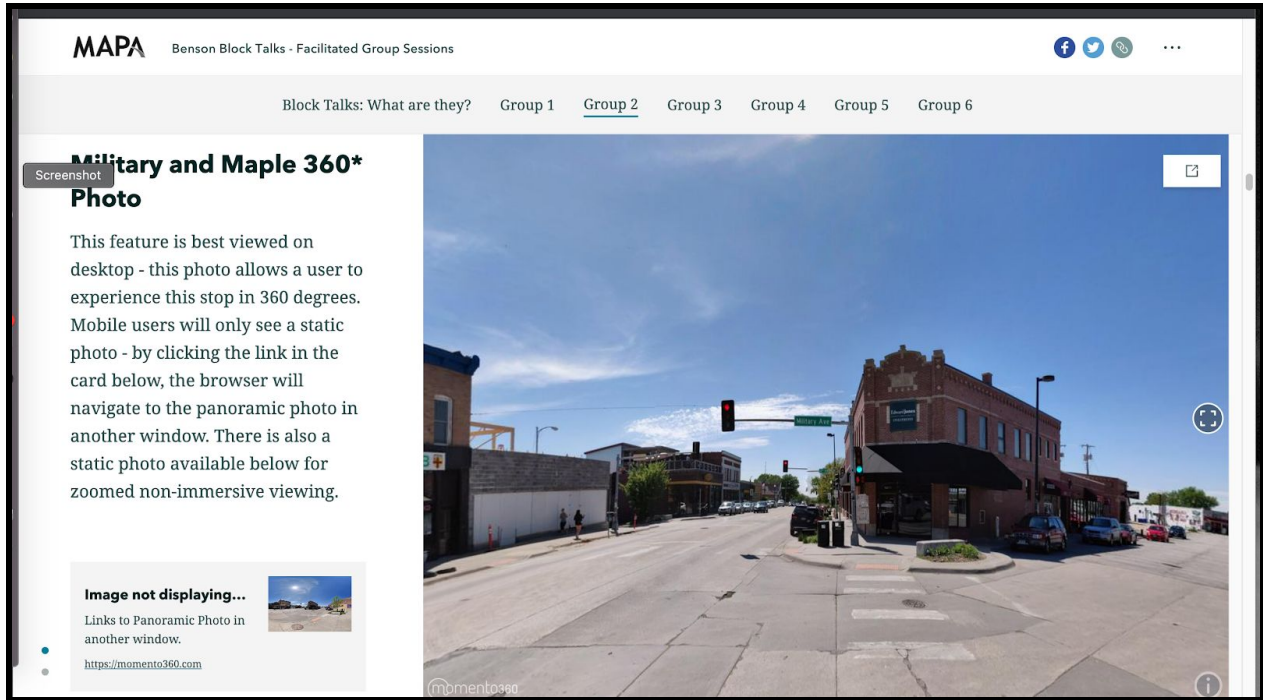
² FHWA. (2020). STEP STUDIO: Tools for selecting and implementing countermeasures for improving pedestrian crossing safety. https://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/ped_bike/step/resources/docs/step_studio.pdf



Virtual Tools

In order to make Block Talks more accessible and allow for social distancing, MAPA staff developed virtual Block Talks that allow for participants to virtually travel along the corridor. Participants can and examine key points and intersections in depth with 360° virtual images both through the facilitators shared screen or on their own link.

Figure 2: 360° Image at Military and Maple from the Facilitated Block Talk StoryMap



Participants then choose a numeric score to give the stretch and provide comments, like in an in person Block Talk with facilitators recording comments on an intime survey tool. This is then used to generate a map of the comments which was used to inform the facilitated Block Talk.

Public Comment Overview

A total of 57 survey comments were filled out between the three walks and the attached parking survey. Overall, all three standalone surveys identified sidewalk improvements, street trees or plantings, and the need for pedestrian amenities as top concerns for the Maple street Corridor. The most common suggestion was for wider sidewalks and to have more contiguous sidewalks to connect the area. The entire set of received comments have been provided to the Benson Block Talk stakeholders for their consideration.



Table 1: Survey Response by Focus Area

Focus Area	Respondents
Infrastructure	7
Neighborhood	31
Alleyway	13
Parking	6
Total	57

The Neighborhood walk focused on the street interaction with the local businesses and users. Many of the participant’s comments were centered around their pedestrian and cyclist experiences in Benson. The recommendations for sidewalk improvements and more greenery reflect this. The safety of pedestrians and cyclists was a major concern as was how the focus on how automobiles affected this safety.

Figure 3: Word Cloud from Neighborhood Walk Survey Responses



The infrastructure walk was more focused on the street design and responses were about sidewalks and the need for better connections between the main commercial and surrounding amenities.

The Alleyway survey was smaller and involved the Benson Business Improvement District’s efforts to activate alleys off of the main commercial strip. Discussion was about public art and the need to provide more opportunities for art and street interaction.



The parking survey was a continuation of the City of Omaha's Parking Division study on Parking in Benson. Respondents were asked to rate how they felt about current parking and a variety of potential changes to current parking policy. The top-rated solution was to put in a dedicated spot for ridesharing apps to do pick ups and drop offs. Metered parking was also well received but did not get the same consensus. The other two surveys also had comments relating to the need to facilitate space for ridesharing and to discourage people from driving to and from a bar district. Rating was conducted using a five question Likert scale, with 5 being the most positive and 1 being most negative.



Benson Neighborhood Survey Results

Figure 4: Map of Route and Comment Locations for the Benson Neighborhood Survey

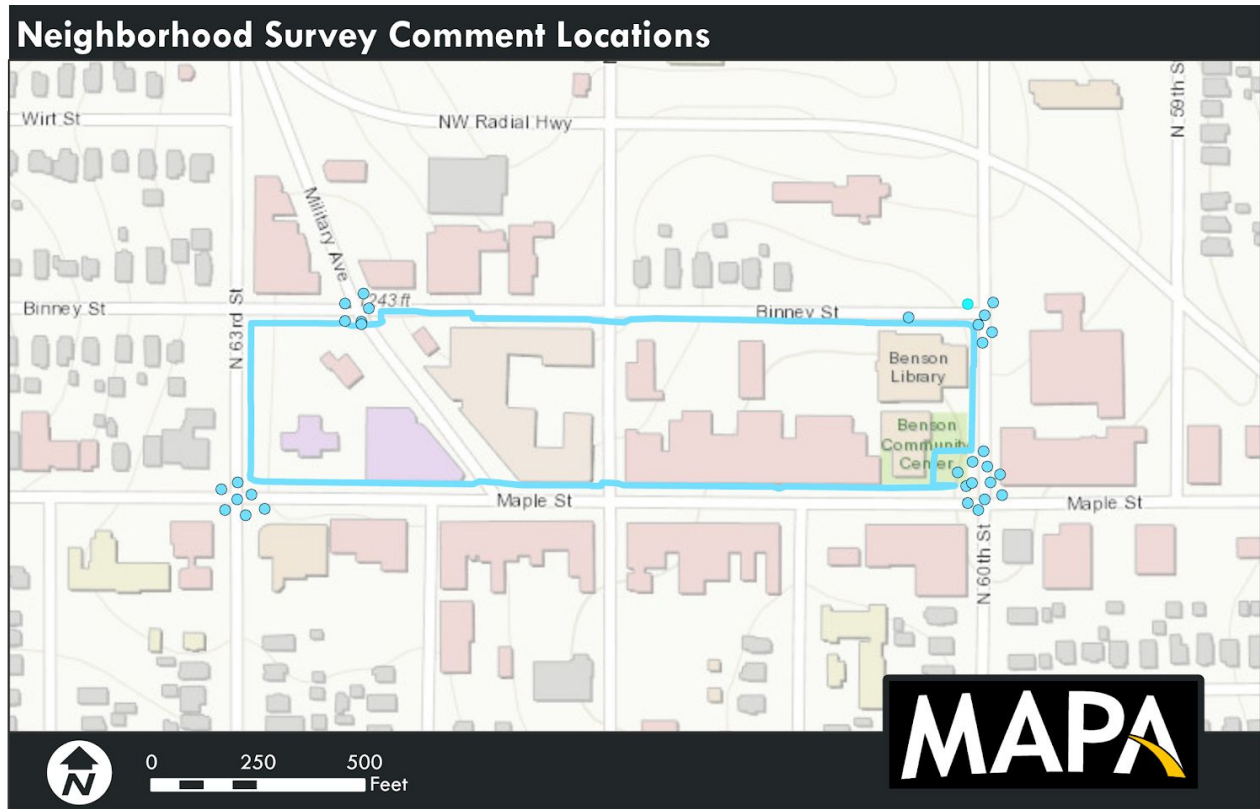


Table 2: Analysis of Pedestrian Safety Comments from the Benson Neighborhood Survey

Intersection	Comments	Avg. Score	Corridor and Intersection Comments
60th and Binney St	7	3.5	Sidewalk gaps, street out of context from use, intersection gets lost between Maple and NW Radial Highway intersections
60th and Maple St	12	5.8	Mostly positive, concern bump-out at SE corner affects NB traffic turning EB
63rd and Maple St	7	4.8	High speed traffic, concern for ice accumulation at intersection, and cross-slope along some sections of sidewalk
Binney St and Military Ave	6	3.0	Sidewalk maintenance required, intersection is wide and not friendly for crossing on foot



Benson Infrastructure Survey Results

Figure 5: Map of Route and Comment Locations for the Benson Infrastructure Survey

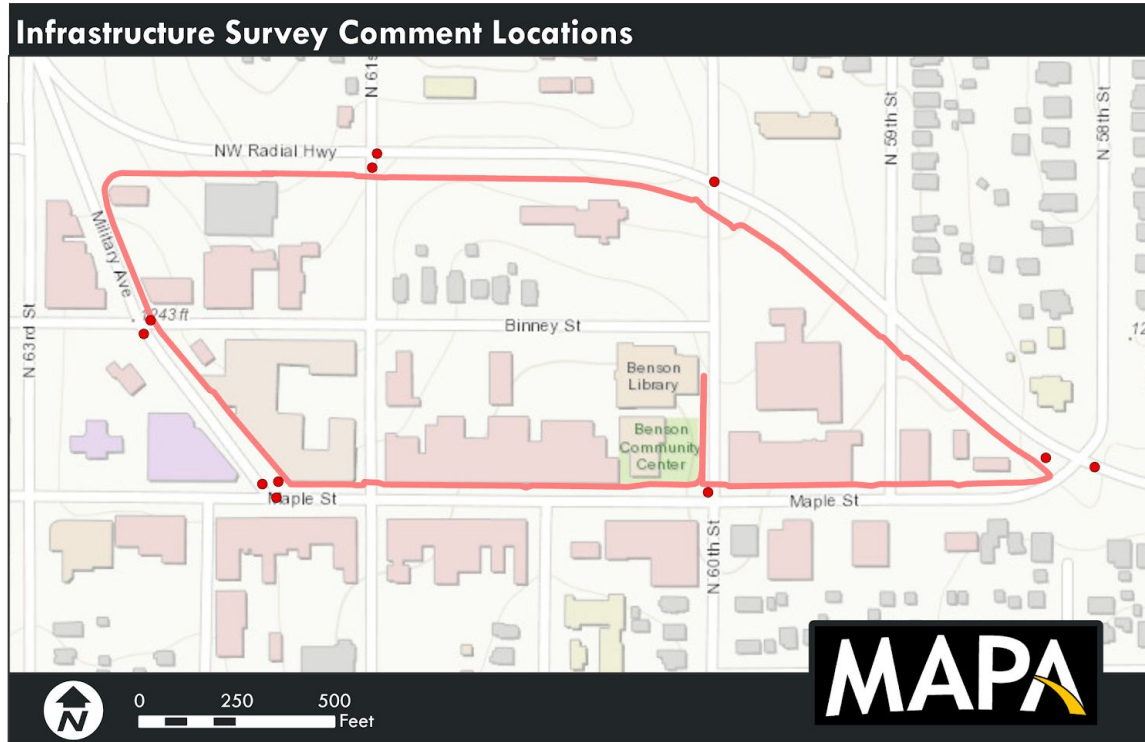


Table 3: Analysis of Pedestrian Safety Comments from the Benson Neighborhood Survey

Intersection	Comments	Avg. Score	Corridor and Intersection Comments
58th and NW Radial Highway	3	5.7	High vehicle speeds and sidewalks too close to the road
60th and Maple St	1	Not scored	Fences limit pedestrian flow
60th St and NW Radial Highway	1	5.0	Crosswalk improvements possible, high vehicle speed traveling WB
61st St and NW Radial Highway	2	4.0	Lack of painted crosswalks, high vehicle speeds
Binney St and Military Ave	2	6.0	
Military Ave and Maple St	2	8.0	Recommended improvements to inform driver's they are entering a business district



Benson Alleyway Survey Results

Figure 6: Map of Route and Comment Locations for the Benson Alleyway Survey

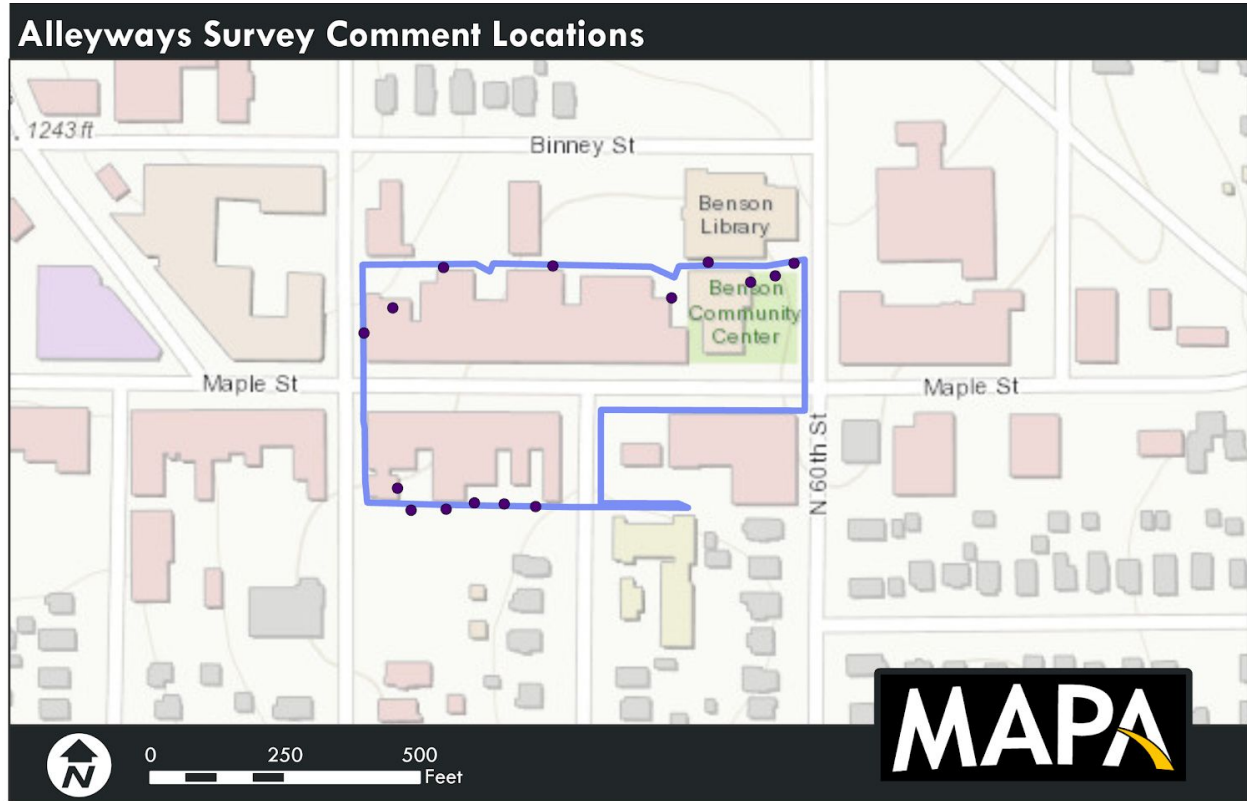


Table 4: Pedestrian Safety Comments from the Benson Alleyway Survey

Alleyway	Corridor and Intersection Comments
Between Binney and Maple St	Recommended lighting for pedestrian use after dark and amenities (seating, signs) highlighting pedestrian use
Between Maple and Miami St	Recommended lighting for pedestrian use after dark and signage, markings indicating shared use of the alley



Facilitated Block Talk

After the main surveys for Benson had been collected MAPA held a facilitated virtual Block Talk with the public and stakeholders to take a deeper look at the main intersections identified in the Benson area. There were 30 participants broken out into 6 groups who each took a pair of intersections or street segments to discuss. Responses were recorded via Survey123 forms and Jamboard with each group reporting the main issues and solutions found for their segment.

Participants in the facilitated Block Talk included citizens and stakeholders:

- Benson Business Improvement District
- City of Omaha Public Works
- Nebraska Department of Transportation
- Omaha By Design
- MAPA
- Heartland Bikeshare
- Greater Omaha Chamber

The facilitated Block Talk identified many street and intersection improvements including suggestions for better crosswalk repair, metered parking and bike amenities. These comments were tied to the locations that the groups were discussing and were taken and mapped in real time by MAPA staff and presented during the group report outs.

High Level Assessment

A total of 57 surveys were filled out between the six groups, covering eight intersections and adjacent roadway segments. These survey results were then used to identify nineteen potential projects, programs, or policies that could improve conditions at these locations.



Table 5: Summary of Comments by Intersection from the Pedestrian Safety Survey

Intersection	Main Issues Summary
58th St and NW Radial Highway	Traffic speed is the issue identified at this intersection.
60th and Binney St	Need better sidewalk connections.
60th and Maple St	There is a desire to have more separation between drivers, bicyclists, and pedestrians at this location.
60th St and NW Radial Highway	Sidewalks need improvement.
61st St and NW Radial Highway	This area is very unfriendly to pedestrians due to speed, lack of crosswalks, and narrow sidewalks.
63rd and Maple St	Traffic speed and a disconnect between the landuse and street are the most common comments.
Binney St and Military Ave	The lack of consistent sidewalk is an issue here with poor lighting and other pedestrian amenities needed.
Maple St and Military Ave	The traffic volumes and lack of pedestrian space maintenance were identified as the main issues at this intersection with it receiving an overall positive score.

Benson Action Planning Results

Notes on Process

The action planning process establishes broad categories of Projects, Programs, and Policies, and identifies notional short and long-term periods to focus discussion. The group output includes possible organizations to assign these actions to and consider supporting organizations. All of these actions will require additional research and coordination, and are intended only to provide a place to start. Comments following initial coordination with stakeholders are summarized following each table.



Figure 9: Map of Action Planning Project Responses

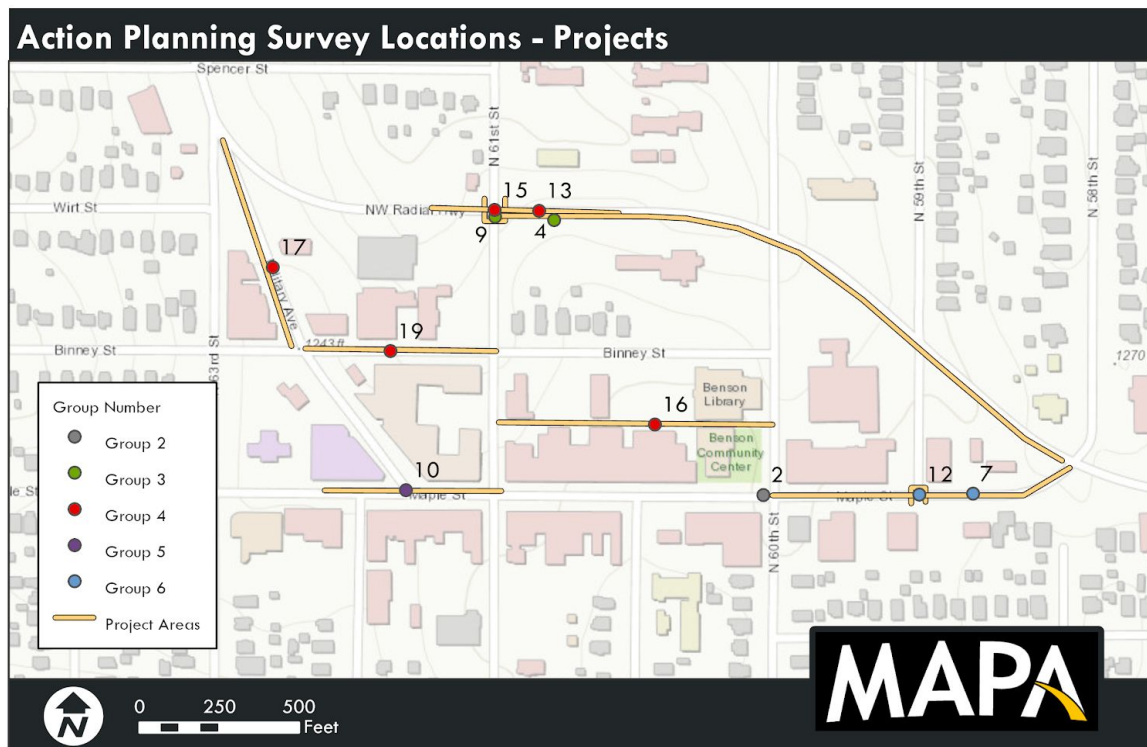


Table 6: Proposed Action Planning Project Responses

Time Frame	Assign To	Support By	ID	Project Description
Short Term	Benson BID	City of Omaha	16	Improve the alleyway with lighting and art to make it more inviting and attractive.
	City of Omaha	NDOT	2	Redo the crosswalk paint. Redo the sidewalk curbs and ADA cut to improve the feel of the area, extending these further North to provide a better connection.
		NDOT	9/15	No crosswalks currently exist at any corner of 61st and NW Radial Hwy. With redevelopment there will be more pedestrian activity.



Time Frame	Assign To	Support By	ID	Project Description
Long Term	City of Omaha	Benson BID	17	Extend the sidewalk and landscaping improvements north on Military to NW Radial to tie the existing improvements to new development. Provide more shade and greenery near Binney to make it feel like less of an "edge" and more welcoming to pedestrians.
			10	The center turn lane is not used for much beyond unloading and causes issues for pedestrians and vehicles when Benson is busy. A study should be pursued first.
			19	There are continuous driveways east of Military on Binney that do not have sidewalks currently. Possibly close driveways and add sidewalks as redevelopment of the street occurs.
		NDOT	13	As redevelopment occurs north of NW Radial, the high-speeds of traffic might make crossing at grade uncomfortable. A pedestrian bridge over the highway could make this connection.
			7	Restoring brick streets if applicable to slow traffic.
		Unsure	4	Add landscaping to add shade and make the walk cooler. Possibly, add landscaping to the median.
		NDOT	12	A crosswalk (with potential light) at 59th and Maple. This is very challenging to cross, especially at rush hour.

The alleyway lighting is different from standard street lighting - Benson BID would need to lead. The City of Omaha recommended the use of a streetscaping project to identify all locations and provide a consistent design and approach to improvements. NDOT could review the new crosswalk against existing crosswalk policy, but noted that a statewide Complete Streets document is soon to be published which may provide different guidelines.

The City of Omaha is responsible for maintaining crosswalk paint and other intersection pedestrian amenities. Intersections are inspected annually but residents can also report discrepancies through the Mayor's Hotline.



Figure 10: Map of Action Planning Program Responses

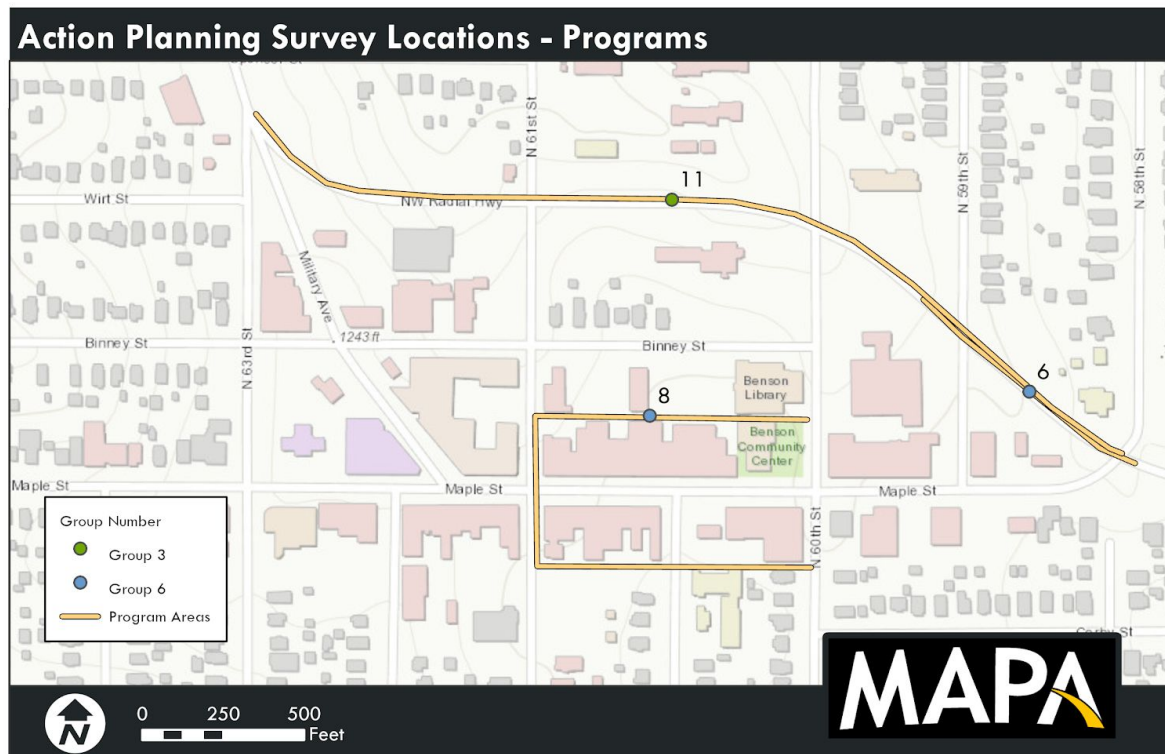


Table 7: Proposed Action Planning Program Responses

Time Frame	Assign To	Support By	ID	Project Description
Short Term	Benson Neighborhood Association	Benson BID	6	Community action to pick up litter along NW Radial.
	Benson BID	City of Omaha	8	Limit access in alleyways to bike/ped in alleys as a pilot.
Long Term	NDOT	City of Omaha	11	Implement Complete Streets Guidance and include wider 8' sidewalks.

A pilot to limit access would need to be vetted with all associated organizations, and the alleyway would be leased with ParkOmaha, similar to the alleyways in the Old Market. It would be beneficial to consider the NDOT Complete Streets guidance once issued, and as stated previously, conducting a streetscaping project to identify and apply consistent design standards and landscaping amenities would accomplish this goal. These standards would then be applied as projects arise; such as during redevelopment or road maintenance.



Figure 11: Map of Action Planning Policy Responses

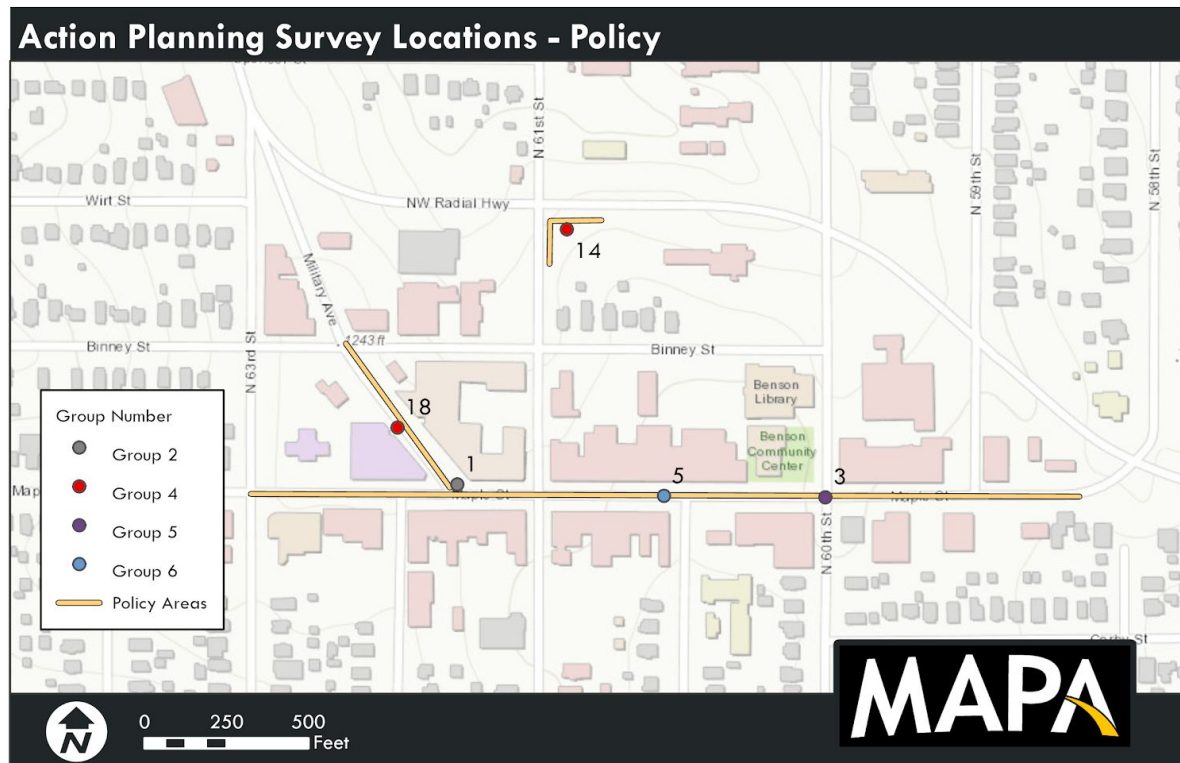


Table 8: Proposed Action Planning Policy Responses

Time Frame	Assign To	Support By	ID	Project Description
Short Term	Benson BID	Property Owner	14	There is currently a fence adjacent to the parking lot at 61st and NW Radial, it makes it so pedestrians can't cut through and signals that it's not a place for them. Removing it would improve pedestrian connections
	City of Omaha	Benson BID	18	Military Avenue is an outdoor event space, a street mural could denote this shared space. Could tie to the alleyway improvements and visually connect the pedestrian spaces.
		Unsure	3	Especially at larger intersections like 60th & Maple the signal timing should be adjusted to allow pedestrians more time to cross.



Time Frame	Assign To	Support By	ID	Project Description
Long Term	City of Omaha	Benson BID	1	Using painting and signage to improve the Military Ave and Maple St intersection and provide more distinction between car and pedestrian spaces. Defining the edges more to provide safety, repainting the cross walks and some improvements for pedestrians. Reclaiming spaces for pedestrians
		Benson Neighborhood Association	5	Parking meters can be a traffic calming device and encourages mass transportation/alternative modes.

Signal timing and proper function of pedestrian crossing hardware is checked annually by City of Omaha traffic technicians. Benson signals are currently planned for review in 2027 (funding dependent) through the City’s Signal System Master Plan project. Additional information about signal maintenance, along with contact details to report signal issues or request timing changes can be found at:

<https://publicworks.cityofomaha.org/residents2/traffic-engineering/traffic-signals-signs-markings-and-street-lights/traffic-signals>

Next Steps

Many of the action items are interrelated, and all will require coordination. For consistency and efficiency, it is recommended that either the Benson BID or the Benson Neighborhood Association lead an effort to prioritize tasks, and apply a standard for short- and long-term project design.



Benson Parking Survey Results

Table 9: Survey Score Results from the Benson Parking Survey

Question	Score (1-5, 5 Highest)											Avg
Do you find it difficult to find parking in Benson?	2	4	2	4	1	3	4	4	4	3	3	3.1
Do you feel that ridesharing apps, and a dedicated rideshare pickup and drop off location, would benefit Benson?	4	5	3	4	4	4	5	4	4	5	5	4.3
Do you think that current parking policies are sufficient, and provide safe access for all users?	2	3	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	2.3
Do you think policy changes (such as hours of enforcement) would ease parking problems?	3	2	4	1	5	3	4	4	4	1	3	3.1
Do you feel that putting in metering measures or parking time restrictions would improve parking access for businesses along parts of downtown of Benson?	4	1	5	3	5	3	5	4	4	2	1	3.4
Are there policies that could be implemented to make parking in Benson safer or more visible?	5	4	5	3	4	4	5	4	4	4	4	4.2

Post Workshop Survey

After the virtual facilitated Block Talk, MAPA sent participants a survey to gauge their experience of giving feedback, using zoom, using the survey tools, and the structure of the meeting. Overall, the responses were positive with people feeling comfortable with the technology and that their input was received and would be acted on. Of the 30 participants 15 provided feedback



Table 10: Post Workshop Survey Results

Question	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Unsatisfied	Very Unsatisfied
How would you rate your virtual block talk experience?	53.33% 8	46.67% 7	0% 0	0% 0	0% 0
How user friendly did you find the technology?	66.7% 10	33.3% 5	0% 0	0% 0	0% 0
How likely are you to recommend attending a Virtual Block Talk to others?	66.7% 10	33.3% 5	0% 0	0% 0	0% 0

Overall people found that the technology was intuitive to use and that the small break out groups facilitated good conversation about the stops.

“I think it's a valuable way for citizen activists to contribute to decisions affecting active transportation options.”

Some felt that the online nature of the discussion allowed for better conversation and more considered opinions while others missed the interactive nature of being on the street.

“So easy and convenient to get citizen discussion and input. The facilitators helped a lot -- without good facilitators, it would not have gone nearly as well.”

The report outs and after session summaries were useful to most of the participants and fostered a sense of buy in and willingness to continue to be a part of the planning process. The report outs and documentation of steps made after the Block Talk will be a vital part of ensuring that future efforts are successful and people will remain willing to give time to these efforts.

