



Municipal Leaders Can Help to Create Healthy Communities

By LANI TELIAN

Children are planting vegetables during the school day, and soda is notably missing from the vending machines at the school cafeteria. Hungry cyclists are parking their bicycles in hand-crafted bike racks while they run into the local pizza parlor, which is showcasing its smaller-portion, lower-fat menu options. Employees are taking the stairs rather than waiting for the elevator and choosing fruit, nuts and yogurt from the vending machine.

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Sound too healthy to be true? Think again. In a growing number of Massachusetts cities and towns, these scenes are becoming the norm. As part of the Department of Public Health's statewide initiative to reduce obesity, called Mass in Motion, fourteen municipal agencies received two-year funding to create a sustainable approach for increasing access to active living and healthy eating. Under the leadership of mayors, town managers, boards of selectmen and other municipal leaders, these communities are collaborating with community-based organizations, local businesses and committed residents on efforts that will have a positive impact on the health of those who live, work and learn in their cities and towns.

These changes can't come soon enough. Rates of obesity have skyrocketed over the last ten years. More than half of adults and one-third of Massachusetts children and teens are now either overweight or obese. While the rates of obesity are high, the cost is even higher. An estimated \$1.8 billion is spent on obesity-related medical costs in Massachusetts each year—a figure that is considered to be conservative.

Some Things Community Leaders Can Do

- Limit unhealthy food and drinks in municipally owned buildings
- Make sure open space and recreation master plans protect pedestrians and promote cycling
- Develop community gardens and farmers markets
- Restrict fast food establishments near schools
- Change zoning and land-use policies to allow healthy food retailers in neighborhoods in need
- Create bike paths and greenways to promote exercise
- Implement a Safe Routes to School program
- Improve outdoor play areas for children

So what can be done? Many individuals are aware of what they need to do to lose weight and stay healthy. The recommendations for reaching and maintaining a healthy weight sound simple: eat whole grains, lean protein, low-fat dairy products, vegetables and fruit, and get regular physical activity. And yet we know it's not as easy as it sounds. Residents and schoolchildren need help.

What happens when families don't live close to large grocery stores or have no access to fresh, affordable produce? How can children living in unsafe neighborhoods be expected to play outdoors or safely walk to school? How likely will residents be to ride bikes with no bike racks in sight? How can we expect overweight and obese children to make healthy choices when they're faced daily with the temptation of sugary sodas in their schools?

Making 'Healthy' Easy

In many communities there are countless conditions that affect personal choices and behavior. "It is unreasonable," says the Institute of Medicine, "to expect that people will change their behavior easily when so many forces in the social, cultural, and physical environment conspire against such change." Reducing the high rate of obesity is about more than individual willpower. It requires municipal-wide support for the implementation of policies, systems and environmental strategies to increase access to healthy eating and opportunities for active living. In simple terms, it's time to change our environments by making the healthy choice the easy choice.

The Mass in Motion Municipal Wellness and Leadership Grant Program is helping to make this change a reality in a number of communities. In this unprecedented public-private partnership, supported by all the leading health-

Mass in Motion participating communities

- Brockton
- Dorchester (Boston)
- Everett
- Fall River
- Fitchburg
- Franklin
- Gloucester
- New Bedford
- Northborough
- Revere
- Springfield
- Tri-Town (Lee, Lenox and Stockbridge)
- Weymouth
- Worcester

funding foundations in Massachusetts, local community organizations and residents are working together to create opportunities through policy and environmental change. In line with the recommendations of the national childhood obesity prevention initiative, called Let's Move!, local leaders and residents have assessed their communities' needs and interests; created action plans; and implemented sustainable, evidence-based approaches for a healthier environment.

Local leadership plays a major role in shaping policies and implementing practices that change the communities in which we live. Local leaders can:

- Introduce new bylaws or ordinances to revise building codes and land-use zoning
- Recommend funding for infrastructure improvements
- Provide increased community policing, more street lighting, and off-hours access to school gyms and athletic fields (through joint-use agreements)

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Model Policy Can Be Used to Encourage Walking, Cycling

A sample policy will soon be available to help cities and towns make their streets more conducive to walking and bicycling. The Complete Streets policy is being written specifically for promulgation in Massachusetts as a city ordinance or town bylaw.

Complete Streets is a planning concept that strives to have roads designed or retrofitted to take into account all modes of transportation: cars, trucks, public transportation, pedestrians, bicycles and other types of non-motorized transport. Incorporating Complete Streets planning principles into roadway design is expected to result in an increase of both walking and bicycling by providing a safe and adequate space on the roadway.

About one-quarter of all automobile trips in the United States stay within one mile of home; two out of five automobile trips are within two miles, according to a U.S. Department of Transportation study. Roadways that are more inviting for bicycles and pedestrians encourage people to leave their cars at home for these short trips, which decreases traffic congestion while improving public health, according to supporters of Complete Streets principles. Improvements to intersection design can also reduce accidents involving pedestrians and bicycles.

Complete Streets principles also help cities and towns design roadways that are compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act and to provide alternatives to driving for older residents.

Cities and towns are not expected to undertake street projects solely to incorporate Complete Streets concepts, but the local bylaw or ordinance will ensure that the principles are addressed in all development, reconstruction or street repair projects.

The local bylaw or ordinance can require reasonable efforts to meet Complete Streets goals as well as those outlined in the Massachusetts Highway Division's "Project Development and Design Guide." The nationally renowned guide is considered a "best practices" manual for incorporating Complete Streets goals into transportation planning.

The sample policy will incorporate best practices from the Complete Streets field as well as language from similar policies now in place in St. Louis and San Francisco.

To obtain a copy of the Complete Streets sample policy when it is completed, send an e-mail to djwilson@mma.org. Also available is a model board of health resolution that cities and towns can adopt to encourage increased physical activity, injury prevention and improved nutrition through local efforts.

For more information about the Complete Streets concept, visit www.completestreets.org.

– D.J. Wilson

- Galvanize widespread support among residents for changes that make the healthy option the easy option

To help increase access to healthy foods, zoning regulations and land-use policies can be changed to allow healthy food retailers to move into neighborhoods in need, or they can be used to identify additional space for community farmers gardens and farmers markets. The city of Fall River created a designation for Healthy Neighborhood Markets, which identify healthy food and drink options in community stores and markets. Offering incentives is another way to entice supermarkets and grocery stores to move into underserved neighborhoods.

Promoting healthy eating isn't just about improving access to healthy foods; it's about decreasing access to unhealthy foods as well. For example, a local planning board can pass regulations to limit the number of fast food vendors in the area, or restrict fast food establishments near schools.

Municipally owned buildings can adopt policies limiting unhealthy food and drinks. The city of Everett's recreation center recently removed all sugar-drinks and unhealthy snacks from vending machines, and City Hall will soon do the same. The city of Weymouth took the first step in reducing sugary snacks in schools by implementing a no-cupcake policy for birthdays.

Promoting Active Lifestyles

The Mass In Motion communities of Everett, Gloucester, Fall River and Weymouth have begun work on their open space and recreation master plans in order to better protect pedestrians and promote cycling. This will have a significant impact by increasing healthy options for residents to get from one place to another in their area.

Although adopting new bylaws, amending current regulations or ordinances, and developing an entirely new open space and recreation or land-use master plan will increase sustainable opportunities for more active living, there are many opportunities that communities can coalesce around now while these other strategies gain momentum.

Everett created community gardens in schools and implemented healthy dining





Schoolchildren in Fall River demonstrate their commitment to living in a healthy community.

programs in neighborhood restaurants. Fall River has greatly expanded its farmers market program. Another strategy might be providing transportation to farmers markets by the senior van to make these markets much more accessible to older residents.

Local officials can encourage walking and bicycling—connecting schools, town centers, other local businesses, along with parks and playgrounds throughout the community—by maintaining or improving existing sidewalks and bike lanes and adding more. The Mass in Motion team in Franklin is working with its local government and the Franklin Rails to Trails Committee to create a connected pathway through the neighboring towns. With Mayor William Flanagan’s support, Fall River established a bike path committee and is planning several greenways throughout the city.

Local leadership should support the implementation of the Safe Routes to School program, increasing the number of children walking or bicycling safely to and from school. The cities of Everett, Gloucester and New Bedford have enrolled several schools in Safe Routes to School, allowing them to apply for

infrastructure funds to assess and improve the physical environment within a certain radius of the school. Gloucester has also installed bike racks throughout the city. Fitchburg partnered with the YMCA and a local church to provide safe areas for children to play outdoors. Fall River, meanwhile, initiated an Adopt-a-Park program.

There are countless ways the influence of local leaders can change the environment in which their family, friends, neighbors and constituents live. Communities and residents can only do so much without the full support of their municipal leadership. Now is the time to bring everyone to the table and discuss what changes need to be made, and how we can go about making them. 🌱

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Resources

Mass in Motion:
www.mass.gov/massinmotion

Active Living by Design:
www.activelivingbydesign.org

The Institute of Medicine’s report “Local Government Actions to Prevent Childhood Obesity”:
www.iom.edu

Master Plans Can Promote Health

A community master plan describes what a community looks like and what direction it will take over the next ten to fifteen years. It takes into consideration the community’s goals, resources, issues and needs. It’s also an opportunity to establish the vision of a healthy community. Typically, a master plan:

- Provides a framework for the physical development of the community
- Translates the community’s values into action
- Acts as the basis for the preparation of zoning bylaws, subdivision regulations, budgets and capital improvement programs

The goal of creating a healthy community can be part of the many conversations that take place in the preparation or revision of a master plan. When the topic turns to neighborhood design, it can include features that encourage active lifestyles, such as sidewalks and street lighting. When the conversation focuses on transportation, it can include bike lanes and traffic-calming measures. When multi-family housing or rental versus owner-occupied dwellings come up, it’s a chance to encourage residency right downtown, above the local shops and across from the city park or the town green—a concept commonly known as “smart growth.”

The master plan is not all about land use and housing; it’s about people having the opportunity to live, learn, work and play in a community that supports active living.

– Lani Telian