

Community



Design

Can Improve Health, Environment and Local Economy

By MARK FENTON

Where you live can make you fat. This idea often surprises people, but it's true. Research is confirming that there are myriad ways our communities shape our lives and how healthy we are. Wide streets with speeding traffic don't encourage you to let your child walk to school, while safe sidewalks and clearly marked crosswalks might. A regular farmers market is an invitation to healthy eating, while endless strips of fast food restaurants are just the opposite. The design of a community and the amenities offered can have a dramatic effect on the health of residents.

In order to reduce the risk of chronic disease, obesity and early death, adults should be getting at least 150 minutes of physical activity a week, or about thirty minutes on most days, and children should get a minimum of an hour of exercise a day, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Unfortunately, it's estimated that barely twenty-five percent of adults actually meet these minimum recommendations (through activities such as going to the gym, going for a jog, or other "conscious" exercise). So how do we get the other three out of four Americans to be more active? If they aren't heading to the gym, is there a way to build more physical activity into their daily lives?

Rather than just telling people to pursue healthier behaviors, an increasing number of health promotion initiatives are now focusing on creating healthier communities *by design*. The goal is to partner with policy makers, business leaders, and other stakeholders to create ordinances and practices that can help to make these healthier goals an easy—even routine—part of daily life. The added bonus is that these efforts can have additional positive effects on the community. Smarter community designs can not only improve our waistlines, but actually can provide benefits to a *triple* bottom line: improved economic vitality and environmental sustainability as well as better public health.

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Five Elements of Healthy Communities

In the typical modern suburb based on contemporary zoning, housing subdivisions are separate from strip malls and big box stores, which are separate from office and industrial parks, which are separate from consolidated school complexes. Every trip that a resident takes to shop or go to school or work requires jumping in the car. Destinations are too far apart to walk or ride a bike, and the density of development is too low to support a meaningful transit system. Sidewalks are often incomplete or missing, and many destinations are designed for automobiles only. Giant parking lots dominate the retail and business landscape, and crosswalks, bike lanes, and other safety features are a rare afterthought. The notion of a neighborhood store is absent, often precluded by "single use" zoning codes.

Compare this picture to a traditional Massachusetts community. Historically, there was agricultural, open, or forested land surrounding a village core or city center. Those centers typically included a main business district with most shopping needs, from groceries to hardware, as well as the library, post office, town hall, and businesses, often centered on a public green or square. Nearby were compact neighborhoods of homes and apartment buildings, churches and schools. In even the smallest towns, the main streets exhibited what planners call "mixed use," with retail stores on the first floor and offices or apartments above in two- and three-story buildings. These buildings were normally built right up to the sidewalk, not set behind giant parking lots. Street trees, benches, and on-street parking were common, as were marked crosswalks. These features assured that it was reasonable to walk or ride a bike between destinations. Even if you had driven into town, you could walk from the bank to the post office to the grocery store.

It turns out these differences in design truly influence the population's health. Researchers have identified a number of characteristics that define settings where people are more likely to be physically active and even eat a better diet as a part of their daily lives. Studies have even correlated obesity risk to community design and time spent in motor vehicles.

Here are five elements that characterize healthier communities:

1. **Compact and varied neighborhoods.** It's a lot easier to walk to pick up a quart of milk if there's a corner store in the neighborhood. Healthy communities feature a mix of land uses; where we live, work, shop, play, learn and pray are intermingled and close together.
2. **Connections for "active transportation."** Quality sidewalks, pathways and bike lanes, safe crossings, and a good network of streets (without lots of dead ends) encourage activity by connecting neighborhoods and destinations for walkers and bike riders. A good transit network—reliable, affordable and frequent—is also important. (Not surprisingly, regular transit riders have been shown to get more daily physical activity.)
3. **Inviting designs and destinations.** Buildings constructed near the street are inviting to pedestrians and bicyclists, while giant parking lots between the sidewalk and front door are a

deterrent. Street trees, awnings, benches, bike racks, and transit stops are not just aesthetically pleasing, they improve the setting functionally for pedestrians, cyclists and transit users.

4. **Safety and access for all.** Curb ramps, countdown timers on pedestrian signals, and safety features such as median islands are examples of the many tools that can be used to encourage walking and bicycling by people of all ages and abilities. These are especially valuable to those too young or old to drive a car, as well as poorer residents and those with disabilities that limit automobile access.
5. **Accessible and affordable healthy food.** Zoning policies can make it easier to access healthier food choices by protecting farmland, assuring space for farmers markets, enabling community gardens and community-supported agriculture, creating incentives for grocery stores in all neighborhoods, and even restricting the location of fast food restaurants.

How Do We Pay for Healthier Designs?

Budgets are tight, but that needn't keep your community from creating healthier settings. Yes, it costs money to build or repair sidewalks, but many valuable improvements, such as painting crosswalks and bicycle lanes, don't require much funding at all. What they do require is political will, which you can help build.

For costlier projects, here are seven approaches communities are using nationwide. The most successful communities do not depend on any one resource, but draw on all of these.

1. **Routine accommodation.** Make Complete Streets the rule in local roadway design guidelines. Build such requirements into subdivision regulations and even routine paving and painting programs.
2. **Opportunistic improvement.** Build or enhance pedestrian, bicycle and transit facilities at little or no additional cost by doing it during other construction activities, such as sewer projects, utility work and road resurfacing.
3. **Mitigation and impact fees for development.** Require all develop-

ments to study the full transportation impacts of a project—not just estimated motor-vehicle traffic counts, but also opportunities for pedestrian, bicycle and transit travel. Require the developer to construct non-motorized facilities (e.g., sidewalks bike lanes, trails and transit stops) within the project and to nearby, off-site destinations (such as schools, shopping, etc.) to mitigate traffic impacts. Or charge development impact fees to mitigate the impacts, with the fees dedicated to enhanced pedestrian, bike and transit capacity.

4. **Grant programs and transportation funds.** Make use of state and federal resources, such as the Transportation Enhancements program, Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality funds, Transit-Oriented Development grants, Safe Routes to School program funds, Highway Safety Funds and the Surface Transportation program, recreational trail funds, and greenways and trails grants.
5. **Betterments, special improvement districts, and tax increment financing.** Charge adjacent

property owners or a general neighborhood or business district for the construction or improvement of sidewalks, trails, bicycle parking, or other facilities based on the need and increased access and value for those landowners.

6. **Special funding and resources.** Foundations, corporate sponsorships, service groups, and adopt-a-trail and "friends" organizations can all provide funding or in-kind support for the creation or maintenance of facilities such as trails, paths and open space.
7. **Capital improvements.** Many cities and towns have a small but regular portion of the budget annually dedicated to sidewalk, pathway and bike lane construction and maintenance simply because they recognize that it improves community's economic and environmental health.

Funding the long-term maintenance costs of a new trail or sidewalk network can benefit from working with private partners (e.g., foundations and "friends of the trail" organizations).

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Tools for Healthier Designs

Cities that have committed to a healthy communities approach—from Portland, Oregon, to Portland, Maine, and Boulder, Colorado, to Burlington, Vermont—are not only seeing a more physically active population, but they're seeing the economic benefits of heartier downtowns, more stable housing markets, and environmentally sustainable development patterns. A new report from CEOs for Cities, "Walking the Walk: How Walkability Raises Housing Values in U.S. Cities," estimates that homes located in more walkable areas are worth \$4,000 to \$34,000 more than comparable homes in less walkable settings. And the National Association of Realtors, in its summer 2010 magazine, reports a rapidly growing interest in pedestrian-, bicycle- and transit-oriented communities. In a world with unpredictable gas prices, rising obesity rates, and growing environmental concerns, home buyers no longer want to be forced to make every trip by car, according to the report. Likewise, a growing number of business leaders want to locate their companies in communities that provide these attributes to potential employees.

It's increasingly clear, however, that simply "encouraging" healthier designs, or using enlightened principles when it's convenient, is not enough to create a healthy community. Community leaders have to make conscious, policy-based decisions. Here are seven steps communities can take to achieve a healthy community:

- 1. Protect farmland, forests and open space.** Many people think land-use planning means "urban" planning, but the biggest health battleground may be in our smaller communities, where every year more open space is paved over and developed for housing subdivisions and big box retailers. Forward-thinking community land-use plans and policies can allow landowners to receive the value of their land without having to sell out to suburban-style development. The first step is creating plans that designate areas that will not be developed and must be retained as open space or available for agriculture. The second is to implement tools and policies such as agricultural and open space trusts and community-supported agricultural cooperatives, tax abatements, and the sale or transfer of development rights in order to equitably compensate land owners while restraining automobile-oriented sprawl.
- 2. Celebrate and support locally grown food.** Start simply, with a regular local farmers market. If there's enough support (both producers and customers), hold it on multiple days per week in the summer and consider rotating it through different neighborhoods to reach more residents. Create community gardens on school grounds, parks and public land. These can be planted and maintained by students, retirees, service groups and neighborhood associations. Some schools have partnered with nearby organic farmers to guide such efforts. Produce from the gardens can then be sold, donated or even used in the school lunch program. And finally, limit where fast food restaurants can be located. In particular, keep them away from schools.
- 3. Don't create "faux rural" subdivisions.** One of the most depressing sights in America is a suburban-style housing subdivision plopped in a former farm field outside of town, with big houses on oversized lots, winding dead-end streets,

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The Cape Cod Rail Trail connects towns across the Cape and is a national model for recreation, transportation, and economic development.

and only one entry off the main road. It's not surprising that the dominant architectural feature of these homes is often the garages, because every trip from home is by automobile. If the same homes were built in a more compact neighborhood, with a network of streets and sidewalks that connect to commercial and retail areas and public facilities such as parks and government buildings (as you'd find in many traditional small towns across the Northeast), then kids could walk to a friend's house and adults could walk to do errands. The key is for new residential development to mimic what we know works: modest-sized lots on narrower (and thus slower and safer) streets on a well-connected grid, ideally within walking and bicycle distance of meaningful destinations.

- 4. Invest in thriving downtowns and village centers.** Too many communities have seen a regional Wal-Mart or similar store suck the economic life out of the area's downtown. Before any more big box stores come to your community, create incentives, rewards and even zoning requirements that encourage their construction in or close to existing downtowns. In Rutland, Vermont, the Wal-Mart took over the former K-Mart location in the downtown rather than constructing a new store on a commercial strip along the state highway; this helped to maintain the commercial life of the town's core. Likewise, the CVS Pharmacy in Appleton, Wisconsin, was designed to fit in with the storefront style of Main Street businesses.

In communities where the main thoroughfare is a state highway, traffic must be "calmed" to a safe speed when passing through town. Traffic calming and safety measures such as signs, bike lanes, median islands, curb extensions (or bulb-outs), and roundabouts can help pedestrians, bicycles and vehicles safely co-exist. This is good for safety and can actually help conserve on-street parking.

Finally, the more people who live downtown, the healthier downtown businesses will be. So it's important to support apartments or condominiums above retail storefronts in existing buildings and in new construction, matching traditional downtown architectural styles and uses.

- 5. Build and maintain Complete Streets.** The national Complete Streets campaign has a very simple message: Every time a road is touched—whether to build something new or to



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Springfield's investment in "walkability" (and helpful signage) is central to downtown redevelopment efforts.

redesign or maintain an existing road—officials should take into account and accommodate all four user groups: pedestrians, bicyclists, transit, and motor vehicles. This doesn't mean a bicycle lane must be painted on every road, but it does mean that it must always be asked, "Where will a bicyclist safely ride here?" On a rural road that will see relatively little bicycle and pedestrian travel, a wide paved shoulder may suffice. In city and town centers, bike lanes and sidewalks are more appropriate; on primary routes between communities, a multi-use path running parallel to a high-speed roadway may be best. A Complete Streets approach can be a guiding principle adopted by municipal leaders.

Engineering, public works and planning professionals should create roadway standards that prescribe designs for different settings and conditions that account for all user groups, not just motor vehicles. Once design standards are in place, planners and elected officials should require that any new development include pedestrian and bicycle facilities, and pursue funding from state and federal agencies.

6. Create intra- and inter-town trail networks. Here's where even small villages can out-perform larger cities and towns; it's often easier to identify potential trail routes where land has not yet been fully developed. Abandoned rail lines or utility corridors can be ideal. Even along active rail lines, trails are being placed at a safe distance parallel to the tracks. Even more important than long-distance trails that connect villages and towns, however, are the small connector trails that make functional links.

A study funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation found that the most heavily used portions of several long-distance trails featured three attributes:

- The trail was well connected with other elements of the transportation system, including sidewalks, bicycle lanes, small neighborhood links, and transit stops.
- The trail brought users to desirable destinations such as the library, post office, schools, shopping, and parks.
- The trail was not designed as an escape from the community, but rather was integrated into the community fabric. The most successful trails were seen as social venues by residents.

7. Launch a comprehensive Safe Routes to School program. The idea of Safe Routes to School is not simply to help those children who live close to school begin walking and bicycling

more regularly. It's to create an environment where all children get more safe opportunities for more routine physical activity. The idea is to use Engineering improvements, Education and Encouragement programs, enhanced Enforcement, and ongoing Evaluation (the five Es) to make physical improvements as well as to change policies and practices to support more physically active travel. The Massachusetts Safe Routes to School program provides technical assistance and funding for infrastructure improvements to communities across the state, with improvements ranging from sidewalk construction to building key trail connections.

The beauty of many towns across Massachusetts, from colonial ports and farm villages, to mill towns of the industrial revolution, to early urban centers, is that they were fundamentally healthy designs. The problem is that in the automobile-oriented twentieth century, we drifted away from many of the things that made such communities great. Now we must embrace the lessons of these historically healthy designs, if not for ourselves, then for the benefit of the next generation. 🌱

Healthy Community Resources

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,
Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans
www.health.gov/paguidelines

Complete Streets
www.completestreets.org

National Center for Safe Routes to School
www.saferoutesinfo.org

Massachusetts Safe Routes to School
www.commute.com/schools

"Walkability" scores for any address
www.walkscore.com

CEOs for Cities "Walking the Walk" report
www.ceosforcities.org/work/walkingthewalk

Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center
www.pedbikeinfo.org

Department of Conservation and Recreation, trail grants
www.mass.gov/dcr/stewardship/greenway/regionalGrants.htm

Rails-to-Trails Conservancy
www.railstotrails.org

Rails-with-Trails, "Lessons Learned" report
www.altaplanning.com

"On Common Ground," published by National Association of Realtors
www.realtor.org/government_affairs/smart_growth/on_common_ground_summer2010