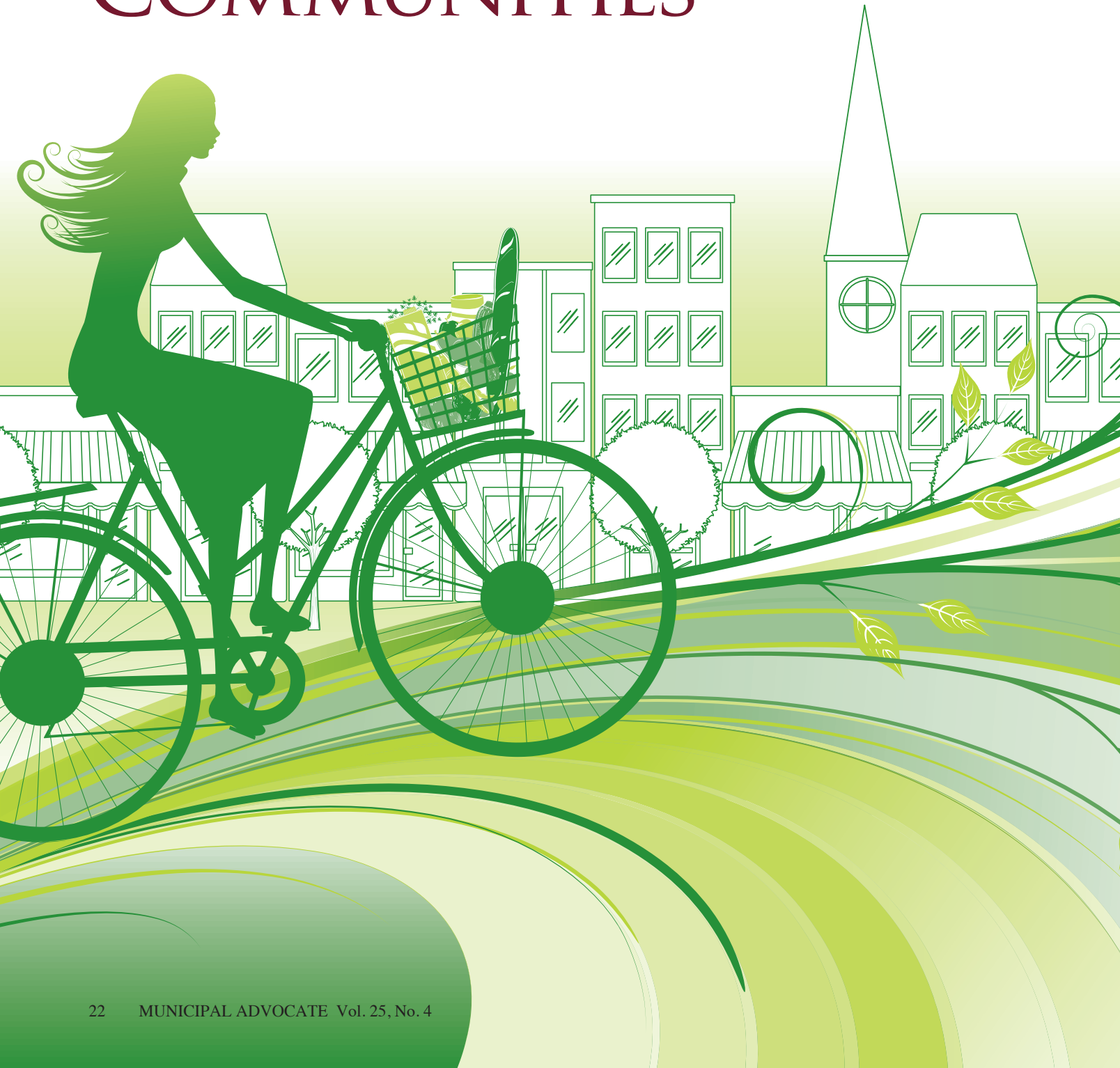


A RURAL, REGIONAL APPROACH TO BUILDING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES





By PETER KOLODZIEJ

Small, rural communities face unique challenges when it comes to promoting public health. Stores, schools and services are spread over wide areas, sidewalks are scarce, and there are limited amenities—and few residents—concentrated in a walkable downtown. All of these attributes serve to discourage physical activity—primarily walking and bicycling—which is the cornerstone of public health. And then there's the matter of limited resources; small towns have small budgets. How can these communities make themselves healthier?

The Berkshire County communities of Lee, Lenox and Stockbridge, with a combined population of 13,000 in seventy-one square miles, have been able to advance their healthy community goals through a regional strategy. The towns are united under the Tri-Town Health Department, which has created a wide range of public health and environmental health programs—programs that would be difficult, if not impossible, for any one of the towns to mount on its own. By joining forces, the three towns are able to expand their repertoire.

A regional strategy is clearly the reason behind the department's successes. A regional entity is cost-effective, so professional public health services can be provided to member communities even in times of tight budgets. And with eighty years of history, Tri-Town Health has a proven track record of obtaining and effectively managing public health and environmental health grant programs, giving the three towns an edge when applying for funding. The department has also identified other regional agencies with similar mission statements and, when possible, partners with them to advance public health programs.

Early Efforts

It was more than twenty years ago when the Tri-Town Health Department established the first household hazardous waste collection program in Berkshire County. Over time, the program morphed into the Southern Berkshire Household Hazardous Waste Collaborative, which now serves twelve communities. Another important environmental program was created shortly after the adoption in 1995 of the state environmental code called Title 5, which regulates the installation and inspection of on-site septic systems. The program's focus was to educate local septic system installers on the latest requirements, since there was no state requirement or provision to address education. Given that the state regulations were very technical in nature, and anticipating an extended learning curve for all affected parties, training was considered critical. The program included classroom instruction and on-site field training, followed by a competency exam. Successful candidates were given a certification card, which benefited the boards of health in Berkshire County in determining the competency of contractors prior to licensing in their community. The program provides continuing education as a way of maintaining certification and providing updates on regulations and on-site septic system technologies.

The region's Tobacco Awareness Program, funded by the Department of Public Health, was established in 1993 and currently covers thirteen commu-

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nities, including the city of Pittsfield. The focus of the program is the prevention of illegal sales of tobacco products to minors, through compliance checks, inspections and enforcement activities. Overall, the program has been effective in reducing illegal sales to minors and reducing smoking rates among Berkshire County teens. But the Tri-Town Health Department decided that more could be done. As a result of staff discussions and meetings with Board of Health members and tobacco retailers, the department decided to propose new tobacco control regulations.

The resulting tobacco control initiative is unique in that it was developed in cooperation with tobacco retailers. The regulation is intended to put more responsibility on tobacco sales clerks by requiring them to attend a training program and pass an exam. Those that pass receive a certification card from the Health Department confirming that they have completed the required training. Certified sales clerks who sell tobacco to a minor are subject to a fine by the Health Department as well as termination by their employer. The program tracks all certified sales clerks to ensure that a terminated clerk is not to be hired by a competitor.

The tobacco sales clerk program has not only reduced illegal sales to minors, but it has also dramatically reduced fines and permit suspensions incurred by store owners. The added benefit for the clerks in attending the ongoing training and recertification process is that they receive constant updates with respect to changes in laws or new products. This component is expected to be a factor in further reducing tobacco sales to minors.

Promoting Wellness

In the fall of 2007, Tri-Town Health partnered with Berkshire Health Systems and the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission to develop a regional initiative to improve the health of the municipal workforce and their work environment. This collaboration resulted in the award of a state public health municipal employee wellness grant to the Tri-Town Health Department. Participating communities included the city of Pittsfield and the towns of Lanesboro, Lee, Lenox and Stockbridge. For the program to be successful, it was imperative to provide a clear message to community leaders

with respect to objectives, benefits and the willingness to share services. The program process began with the formation of a Leadership Steering Committee, which consisted of key municipal leaders, including town administrators, board of health members, health directors, wellness coordinators, local health care providers, and wellness experts.

The program began by conducting workplace environmental assessments at more than twenty sites, in all five communities. The sites included schools, municipal buildings, public works buildings, police stations and fire houses. The next step was an employee health screening component, which included counseling and a follow-up participant action plan for the more than 200 municipal employees who participated. The health risk data that was compiled indicated a high percentage of employees with poor diet, hypertension, high cholesterol, excessive weight, and low physical activity levels. The health screening, conducted by the Berkshire Health Systems Wellness Program, was provided via their outreach van at the designated work sites. This made it convenient for employees to participate, and the professional and sensitive wellness nurses who conducted the screenings made what could have been an uncomfortable experience rather upbeat.

Specific wellness initiatives in all five participating communities included smoking cessation, walking programs, and employee fitness and day spa activities. Eventually, more than 300 employees joined the walking program and more than twenty quit smoking.

Due to state budget cuts, the municipal wellness grant was not funded as anticipated. But, hoping to capitalize on the momentum gained with municipalities, the Tri-Town Health Department in 2009 applied for and was awarded a municipal wellness and leadership grant under the state's Mass in Motion program. Since a local wellness committee was already in place, it was easy to transition to a wider focus on wellness in Berkshire County. The initiative was named "Be Well Berkshires" in order to reflect the county-wide focus. The wellness committee developed a community action plan, with a focus on promoting physical activity and improving nutrition at the community level.

On the nutrition side, the goal was to

partner with municipalities, restaurants, retail food stores, schools, organizations that promote locally grown foods, nutritionists, and health providers to support the availability of healthy menu options—such as low-sodium options, smaller portions, and organic and locally grown food products—at restaurants and schools. The program also promotes the disclosure of nutritional and calorie information at restaurants and schools, as well as information to help consumers make better choices at retail food stores. One example is the Big Y supermarket chain's Nu Val system, which provides consumers with a simple numbering system to help them identify the nutrition level of different foods. The wellness program is also asking local boards of selectmen and boards of health to adopt a healthy meetings/events resolution, which would encourage healthy choices at any town sponsored or sanctioned event with food and drink.

Built Environment

The program's physical activity component looks to partner with municipal departments and boards—select boards, planning boards, zoning boards, boards of health, and public works departments—to help improve the "built environment" (buildings, roads, fixtures, parks, etc.). The goal is to provide "a setting for healthy human activity."

Studies consistently show that programmatic approaches to increase physical activity are not effective with the majority of individuals and tend not to be sustainable beyond the end of the program. This is due, at least in part, to the local built environment, which typically encourages residents to be dependent on automobiles, thereby contributing to a sedentary lifestyle. Across Massachusetts, most people choose to drive to local stores, shops and schools instead of walking or bicycling. Identifying the barriers that residents encounter is a key to improving overall physical activity in a community.

Many communities lack adequate sidewalks, crosswalks or bike lanes. A common complaint is that traffic is moving too fast to make it safe for walking or biking. Due to a lack of attention to land-use planning, schools are often built on the outskirts of town, where development costs may be cheaper, and food and retail stores are too far from residential areas, making it

difficult to walk or bike to them.

As part of the effort to get town leaders to sign a wellness resolution and support the concepts of improving the built environment, the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission offered each community an assessment, at no cost, of one of the following: walkability, bikeability, connectivity, land-use and transportation policy, or parks and recreations areas. One study that has been completed so far, a downtown walkability study for the town of Lee, identified a number of barriers to physical activity, such as conflicts between vehicles and pedestrians, the poor condition of some sidewalks and crossings, a lack of curb cuts for sidewalks, and a lack of way-finding signage. Essentially, the study illustrated the direct relationship between the built environment and physical activity.

Recently, the Tri-Town Health Department has been successful in convincing the boards of health in its three communities to sign healthy meetings and built environment resolutions, and two of the three select boards have endorsed both initiatives (with the third expected to sign on soon). The resolutions are based on templates created by the Department of Public Health.

The Healthy Meetings and Events Resolution calls for “healthy options to be accessible wherever food is provided, regardless of whether food is prepared in a restaurant, by a caterer, at home or at the workplace.”

The built environment resolution signals a commitment “to encourage increased physical activity... through local efforts aimed at enhancing the infrastructure that supports walking and bicycling, reducing injury to pedestrians and cyclists, and lessening street congestion and automobile dependence.” The resolution calls for a comprehensive approach to making the town more conducive to physical activity. Selectmen agree to encourage all municipal boards and departments to work collaboratively, and to include healthy community principles in all projects and decision-making. The resolution signals support for measures such as walking and cycling paths, playing fields and playgrounds, traffic-calming measures, safe and well-lighted sidewalks, safer walking routes to schools, and the siting of new schools and municipal buildings near population centers, among other principles.

In 2011, once the resolutions have been endorsed, the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission plans to meet with local planning and zoning boards to review existing bylaws and land-use regulations, to see if there are opportunities to incorporate healthy community principles. Eventually, these changes will go to local town meetings for their endorsement.

There is a great need for education among municipal boards and departments, in order to encourage them to think in terms of healthy communities in their everyday decision-making. In Lee, for example, the redevelopment of old paper mills is a tremendous opportunity to create a healthier built environment, if all town boards can keep the concept in mind as projects progress.

These are but a few examples of the level of public health programs and initiatives that the Tri-Town Health Department has been able to achieve, despite limited staffing and multiple years of strained community budgets. In addition to enjoying the support of the local boards of health and member communities, Tri-Town Health has been able to take advantage of opportunities that a regional department and approach can provide. In a recent report of the Massachusetts Public Health Regionalization Project, Massachusetts Public Health Commissioner John Auerbach recognized and highlighted the level of achievement at Tri-Town Health and recommended its model for other communities. 🌿

About Tri-Town Health

The Tri-Town Health Department is a regional public health department serving the towns of Lee, Lenox and Stockbridge. Established in 1929 in accordance with the provisions of state law (M.G.L. Ch. 111, Sect. 27A), it is the only regional health department in Berkshire County.

Acting in the capacity of agents to the board of health in each community, the Health Department oversees all administrative, inspectional, enforcement and laboratory responsibilities. In addition to state-mandated core services, the Health Department has provided a variety of timely public health and environmental health prevention grant programs. The process of determining what grants or prevention programs to pursue is based on local public health priorities identified by the Health Department and Board of Health members.

The Health Department is located in the town of Lee, which acts as the lead community. For the purposes of salaries and benefits, Health Department employees are considered to be employees of the town of Lee. The towns of Lenox and Stockbridge contribute their portion of the budget on a quarterly basis. Any additional grant funding awarded to Tri-Town Health is distributed through the town of Lee, which is compensated accordingly for its services.

A critical component for the department's success is an ongoing process of educating and collaborating with other town officials, area agencies, institutions and the general public. The department provides data to support its fiscal viability and value. Revenue generated from the required permitting of businesses and fee-for-service activities covers approximately half of the department's budget. Any fee or permit costs set by the boards of health are kept reasonable, given that the services are not perceived by the community as an opportunity to generate revenue. The process involves periodic surveys of neighboring community fees as well as the calculation of personnel costs.

Health department staffing consists of four full-time employees—the director, an assistant director/prevention programs manager, an inspector/laboratory technician, and an inspector/administrative position—as well as a part-time animal control officer and a part-time animal inspector, who is a licensed veterinarian.

– Peter Kolodziej

