Part One: Healthy Communities

Healthy-Communities Concepts

Improving the Health of a Community

Improving the health of a community relies heavily on two aspects of local government planning: public policies and community design. Public policies that address zoning codes, building regulations, transportation investments, and subdivision regulations all determine the nature of the built environment of a city or town. These policies can help or hinder the development of a community that is conducive to healthy living. Ultimately, these public policies result in certain patterns of community design that shape a town’s infrastructure over time. These are especially important because the design of our cities and towns determines how people use them. Some design characteristics encourage walking, bicycling, transit use and community involvement, whereas others encourage or force automobile dependency and long, solitary commutes. Public policies and community-design characteristics that foster more active forms of transportation and daily living can go a long way in combating rising obesity rates as well as problems related to pollution, environmental degradation, and energy use.

Five Principles of Planning for a Healthy Community: The Big Picture

Of the five overarching principles of planning for healthy communities, the state of Delaware is already making great progress on the principles of Complete Streets. Mandated by the Governor in 2009, the Delaware Department of Transportation has released a Complete Streets Policy that will eventually positively impact the design of communities throughout Delaware. The purpose of this legislation, as stated by the Delaware Department of Transportation, is “to ensure that the Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT) system modifications are routinely planned, designed, constructed, operated and maintained in a way that enables safe and efficient access for all users. The result should be a system for all users that is comprehensive, integrated, connected, safe, and efficient allowing users to choose among different transportation modes, both motorized and non-motorized.” The key aspect of a Complete Streets policy is that it makes streets safe and efficient for all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, transit riders, and those with disabilities, as well as motorists. This approach to road construction and maintenance on a statewide scale will have significant impacts on infrastructure and community designs that foster more healthy lifestyles.

DelDOT is responsible for about 90 percent of the state’s transportation infrastructure. While DelDOT transportation planners and engineers strive to design streets with all users in mind, Delaware local governments have authority for local land use plans and policies, which may not
be consistent or compatible with the statewide Complete Streets policy. Local government policymakers need to develop local Complete Streets policies to strengthen all modes and foster better walking and cycling connections.

An integral part of any Complete Streets policy is the provision of adequate and integrated bicycle and pedestrian facilities. These facilities should include basic infrastructure such as sidewalks, striped bike lanes or shoulders, pedestrian crossing signals and crosswalks, bicycle parking, and adequate lighting. These facilities alone, however, will not significantly increase bicycling and walking behavior. Mixed-use and compact developments are also needed to create an environment in which desirable origins and destinations are accessible by these active transportation modes. If a grocery store is not located within a reasonable distance from a residential area, then residents will be forced to use their automobile for shopping. However, if a neighborhood grocery store is provided near residential areas, then residents will have the option to walk or bicycle for small shopping trips.

Furthermore, the provision of park facilities and open spaces is an important step in encouraging active lifestyles among residents. Local government entities are key players in maintaining open spaces that can create opportunities for healthy active and passive recreation. A final element that contributes to the viability of a healthy community is access to healthy food. The health of many Americans is adversely affected by poor diet, and thus it is very important to provide everyone with access to full-service grocery stores and farmers markets. Healthy-food outlets should be easily accessible by everyone, including car-less households, pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit users.

While no one can be forced to live a healthier lifestyle, municipalities are in a position to create an environment and provide opportunities that will make it easier for residents to eat healthy and get the exercise they need. Many of our towns’ residents lead hectic lifestyles that leave them little time for intentional exercise or maintaining a healthy diet. Thus, planning for a healthy community is one of the best ways to help our population build healthy activities into their everyday lives. Integrating the five principles of healthy-community planning as key elements in the future development of a municipality is an important first step in fostering healthier, happier residents.

**Comprehensive Planning and Healthy Communities**

Delaware State law deems that all municipalities must develop and adopt a comprehensive plan. Title 22 Chapter 7, Section 702 of the Delaware Code defines a Comprehensive Plan as “a document in text and maps, containing at a minimum, a municipal development strategy setting forth the jurisdiction's position on population and housing growth within the jurisdiction, expansion of its boundaries, development of adjacent areas, redevelopment
potential, community character, and the general uses of land within the community, and critical community development and infrastructure issues.”

Most importantly, municipal comprehensive plans have the force of law once adopted. Thus, any public policies adopted or development plans approved by a town in the future must be consistent with the maps and text contained in the comprehensive plan document. Though the comprehensive plan may not always include specific stipulations regarding building codes or subdivision regulations, the comprehensive plan itself serves as a basis for future regulatory policies and community design standards. Plans for recreational pedestrian and bicycle trails, multi-modal transportation networks, sidewalks, on-road bicycle facilities, and streetscaping improvements can all be addressed within a comprehensive plan. Pedestrian and bicycle master plans may also be included as part of a comprehensive plan, as well as subdivision regulations regarding the construction of pedestrian facilities, parks, and open spaces. In short, the comprehensive plan provides a great opportunity to make healthy community elements a part of the town’s development agenda.

Best Practices to Consider During the Comprehensive Planning Process

Many organizations around the country are focusing on how to make communities more healthy places to live. There is a wealth of information available about what elements of city planning and design can lead to more healthy, walkable, and livable communities. A few of these projects and organizations are listed below, along with examples of recommendations from each source. These recommendations should be very helpful during the comprehensive-planning process. Additionally, the organizations and projects listed below can serve as good resources for further study or reference.

It should be noted that many of the recommendations put forth by these organizations and publications address design standards in reference to subdivision regulations, transportation, or building codes. While these types of specific regulations are not commonly enumerated in comprehensive-planning documents, the comprehensive plan can recommend that certain types of regulations be adopted by the town council or local policymakers. For example, a comprehensive plan could recommend that subdivision regulations include a requirement for five-foot-wide sidewalks and small block sizes in order to achieve good pedestrian street connectivity. Similarly, the transportation section within a comprehensive plan could recommend that traffic-calming measures, such as narrower streets and curb extensions, be implemented downtown or in a central business district in order to facilitate a safer pedestrian environment. Moreover, a comprehensive plan can convey the need for Smart Growth or New Urbanism strategies that focus on the efficient use of land and resources while providing multi-modal transportation opportunities through compact, mixed-use development. The inclusion of such recommendations in a comprehensive plan does not ensure that the measures will be
implemented, but it does communicate a strong message about the town’s values, goals, and vision for livability.

**Best Practices**

*National Level*

**National Complete Streets Coalition**

- Complete Streets are designed and operated to enable safe access for all users. Pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and transit riders of all ages and abilities must be able to safely move along and across such a street.

- Complete Streets can be achieved through a variety of policies: ordinances and resolutions; rewrites of design manuals; *inclusion in comprehensive plans*; internal memos from directors of transportation agencies; and executive orders from elected officials, like Mayors or Governors.

- An effective Complete Streets policy must be sensitive to the community context. Being clear about this in the initial policy statement can allay fears that the policy will require inappropriately wide roads in quiet neighborhoods or miles of little-used sidewalks in rural areas.


- Local governments can develop or re-evaluate long-term transportation plans that explicitly set “active transportation” goals for walking or biking as modes of transportation. As part of these goals, they can implement Complete Streets in neighborhoods.

- State and local policymakers can support policies that create open spaces that can include recreational greenways.

- Local policymakers can also identify areas underserved by retail and partner with health officials to ensure that public health is part of comprehensive plans or community planning.