Policy Initiatives for Walkable Communities

As it becomes widely accepted that a long history of car-oriented community design has contributed to many of America’s health problems, especially obesity, more policy initiatives are aiming to promote pedestrian-friendly communities. This trend recognizes that a community’s walkable atmosphere is greatly impacted by its official policies, which in the past have led to a sedentary lifestyle, but an about-face can encourage physically active lifestyles. This section takes a closer look at these initiatives and how their goals for healthy communities can become part of the legal fabric of local government.

Progressive initiatives at the national, state, and local levels seek changes in public policy to support healthier communities by making them more walkable and bikeable. The goal is for physical activity to become an integral part of people’s daily routine, whether that means biking to work, walking to school, or hiking on a trail for pleasure. It is important to note that the concerted effort among governments and various organizations to implement these policies allow communities to compete for transportation funding or other grants that will otherwise go to enterprises that reinforce an inactive mode of living (Squires).

Policy Initiatives at the National Level

Notable organizations at the national level are contributing valuable counsel to the discussion of policy support for walkable communities. Walkable is a generic description of communities whose overall atmosphere—which includes both physical elements (e.g., infrastructure) and non-physical elements (e.g., programs)—encourages inhabitants to be physically active on a regular basis.

Leadership for Healthy Communities

One important organization envisioning more walkable communities through policy efforts is Leadership for Healthy Communities. The organization, a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation program, explains that it “supports state and local policy leaders in efforts to create healthier communities by promoting policies and programs that will…increase opportunities for safe physical activity” (“LHC Homepage”).

Although the organization is primarily concerned with reducing obesity among children, according to its mission statement, its goal to inform leaders about policies that support walkable communities has health benefits for people of all ages and conditions (“LHC Overview”). A recent publication from the organization lists nine strategies for a more “activity-friendly” community (Increasing Active Living, 5-6):
• Establish collaboration between public-sector departments and coordinate efforts among sectors.
• Encourage school facilities and policies that promote active living.
• Improve streets, sidewalks and street-crossings for safer routes to school.
• Support safe, pedestrian-oriented transportation.
• Support active living land-use planning and development.
• Identify and create funding sources for active living initiatives.
• Publicize the availability of active living resources in the community.
• Support parks, trails and recreation facilities.
• Create incentives to support active living in workplaces, communities, and households.

These strategies recommend ways local government leaders can implement a walkability agenda. This is a comprehensive approach that acknowledges the need to find sources of funding as well as to promulgate the community’s walkable features. It is not a matter of simply making the built environment more pedestrian-friendly. Collaboration among different stakeholders, community involvement, incentive creation, and campaigns in schools all contribute to increased active living among citizens of all ages.

National Conference of State Legislatures

Another prominent national organization is the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), a bipartisan organization founded in 1975 that “provides research, technical assistance and opportunities for policymakers to exchange ideas on the most pressing state issues” (“About NCSL”). One significant issue that states face is how to make their communities healthier. The organization assists policymakers with its research on healthy community design, particularly regarding land use. It lists the following land-use policies as ways to encourage active lifestyles (“Healthy Community Design”):

• Mixed-use development
• Transit-oriented development
• Brownfield redevelopment
• Urban infill
• Parks, recreation, and trails
• School siting

Smart Growth Network

As communities develop and grow, there comes a realization that uncontrolled growth can negatively impact citizens’ quality of life (Getting to Smart Growth, i). By 1996, a coalition of national organizations established itself as the Smart Growth Network to promote its solution to haphazard growth. The member groups all adhere to the idea of “smart growth” (Getting to Smart Growth, i):
Healthy Communities: A Resource Guide for Delaware Municipalities

Smart growth makes it possible for communities to grow in ways that support economic development and jobs; create strong neighborhoods with a range of housing, commercial, and transportation options; and achieve healthy communities that provide families with a clean environment.

The Smart Growth Network, upon analyzing the practices of ideal communities to live in, endorses the following ten principal actions (Getting to Smart Growth, i-ii):

- **Mixed land uses** – Placing homes, schools, businesses, and other community facilities in close proximity creates a setting conducive to shopping, interacting with neighbors, and walking (Getting to Smart Growth, 1).
- **Take advantage of compact building design** – Maximizing compact building to preserve land for parks, trails, and farmland; raising the demand for public transportation, which reduces the number of cars on the road (Getting to Smart Growth, 10).
- **Create a range of housing opportunities and choices** – Offering a variety of housing types invites all people to find shelter in the same residential area, establishing a diverse and vibrant community (Getting to Smart Growth, 18).
- **Create walkable communities** – Making walking an attractive travel option has positive impacts on the environment, economic activity, and residents’ physical health (Getting to Smart Growth, 26).
- **Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place** – Ensuring that new growth reflects its values and unique character maintains a community’s togetherness by upholding a common sense of identity among inhabitants (Getting to Smart Growth, 33-34).
- **Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas** – Preserving open spaces provides people with opportunities to enjoy nature while being physically active; encourages growth to take place in areas already with supporting infrastructure; and stimulates the economy through tourism and by attracting businesses (Getting to Smart Growth, 43-44).
- **Strengthen and direct development toward existing communities** – Directing growth toward established community areas results in the preservation of open space, thus protecting the environment and improving air quality; takes advantage of existing infrastructure; and increases the community’s density, which in turn raises the demand for public transportation, strengthens the tax base, and promotes walking (Getting to Smart Growth, 52).
- **Provide a variety of transportation options** – Providing different transportation opportunities combats the growing problem of traffic congestion and induces people to use their cars less (Getting to Smart Growth, 61-62).
- **Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost effective** – Improving the approval process for development projects that support smart growth attracts developers to apply smart growth principles (Getting to Smart Growth, 70).
- **Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration in development decisions** –
Letting the community and all stakeholders participate in development decisions gives everyone a chance to take ownership of a development project that they will support (Getting to Smart Growth, 78).

The Smart Growth Network also gives hundreds of policy examples for implementing the above ten principles. Some of these actions, which specifically focus on pedestrian-friendly communities, include (Getting to Smart Growth II, 32-38):

- Developing a pedestrian master plan.
- Designing communities so that children can walk to school.
- Using trees and other green infrastructure to provide shelter, beauty, urban heat reduction, and separation from automobile traffic.
- Encouraging safe pedestrian routes to transit.
- Developing walking awareness and promotion programs.
- Using modern technology to increase pedestrian safety.
- Using visual cues and design elements to indicate pedestrian rights of way and minimize conflicts.
- Situating parking to enhance the pedestrian environment and facilitate access between destinations.
- Making places walkable for aging populations in response to new demographics and special needs.
- Retrofitting superblocks and cul-de-sac street networks.

**Complete Streets**

Nationally, many streets are considered incomplete because they lack connectivity and the safe integration of infrastructure for non-motorists such as sidewalks, bike lanes, transit amenities, and safe crosswalks. Conventional streets, which rely on local streets leading to collector arterials, have been designed with only one type of user in mind, the driver (“Complete Streets Help Keep Kids Safe!” 1). In contrast, traditional streets are considered to be more pedestrian-friendly. Traditional streets are designed with shorter, connected blocks and are connected through grid-like patterns. A national movement, headed by the National Complete Streets Coalition, is urging local and state governments to develop and adopt policies to “complete the streets” (“How to Get Complete Streets”). Emphasis is placed on improving the streets for multiple users, including pedestrians and bicyclists. The coalition has worked out a list of policies, supporting the complete streets movement, which should be placed on local and state governments’ public policy agendas (“About the Coalition”). To promote complete streets, state and local officials can improve the built environment by adopting policies that (“Elements of Complete Streets”):

- Ensure that streets and roads are designed for all users of all ages and abilities, including pedestrians, bicyclists, transit riders, and motorists.
• Promote street designs that provide a comprehensive, integrated, and connected network and incorporate features such as narrow travel lanes, sidewalks and bulb-outs, bike lanes, wide shoulders, medians, bus lanes and curb cuts, delineated crosswalks, and audible pedestrian signals.
• Require that transportation agencies design roadways and rights-of-way that safely accommodate both automotive and non-motorized vehicle users.
• Integrate sidewalks, bike lanes, transit amenities, and safe crossings into the initial design of built environments.

One important benefit of complete streets is the need for children to get to school safely. Under this initiative, roads leading to schools will have a continuous network of sidewalks and there will be traffic-calming measures in effect near schools. Complete streets policies will support Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs being implemented throughout the country (“Complete Streets Help Keep Kids Safe!” 2). Complete streets can contribute to safer routes to school and provide children and their parents ways to explore healthier, non-motorized alternatives to driving or riding a school bus.

### ADA Accessibility Assistance

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed into law to give civil rights protections and prohibit discrimination to individuals with disabilities with regard to public accommodations, employment, transportation, state and local government services, and telecommunications (DOJ, 1). ADA Title II requires that all state and local governments provide people with disabilities equal access to programs, services, and activities. Government entities are also required to follow specific design guidelines with respect to the construction or alteration of public facilities (DOJ, 3). Three organizations provide the best information and technical assistance on ADA accessibility issues. These are (Derry):

- **U.S. Department of State (DOJ)** – DOJ provides an ADA Technical Assistance Program with free up-to-date information about ADA and how to comply with its requirements. It also provides direct technical assistance through its website, information line, and downloadable publications.
  See: [www.ada.gov](http://www.ada.gov)

- **U.S. Access Board** – This federal agency is committed to providing information and resources on accessible design. In 1999, the Access Board created the Public Rights-of-Way Access Advisory Board (PROWAAC) to address issues impacting all people dealing with barriers to the built environment. ADA Accessibility Guidelines, issued through this agency, include supplements that provide technical assistance with the design of state and local facilities, play areas, and recreational facilities.
  See: [www.access-board.gov](http://www.access-board.gov)

- **Disability and Business Technical Assistance Centers (DBTACs)** – These regional centers were established to provide training, information, and technical assistance on
ADA to businesses, schools, consumers, and state and local governments. A mid-Atlantic center provides assistance to states within the region, such as Delaware.

See: www.adainfo.org

National Trust Main Street Center

In the discussion of healthy communities, special attention is given to a town’s central business district because it can be the center of pedestrian activity. The National Trust Main Street Center, a National Trust for Historic Preservation program, is renowned for its approach to revitalize a downtown with a view to pedestrian friendliness. This national program promotes a unique approach—the Main Street approach—to revive a central commercial district “through preservation and grassroots-based economic development” (“About the National Trust Main Street Center”). The organization has conceived this four-point approach to create an appealing, walkable environment that provides a sense of community and enhances the economic viability of a community’s downtown. The four points are (“The Main Street Approach”):

- **Organization** – Creating a committee to get everyone working toward the same goal and securing financial resources for the program.
- **Promotion** – Advertising the downtown as a livable area and attractive place to invest.
- **Design** – Improving the built environment with special emphasis on pedestrian orientation and enhancing the downtown’s unique characteristics, such as historic buildings and atmosphere.
- **Economic restructuring** – Bringing in appropriate businesses and more consumers and replacing vacant commercial sites with new commerce centers.

The state of Maryland has added a fifth point to its Main Street approach, “Clean, Safe, and Green,” which seeks to “enhance the perception of a neighborhood through the principles of Smart Growth and sustainability” (“Main Street Maryland”).

Delaware Main Street

Following suit, Delaware has adopted a Main Street program that adheres to the four principles of the Main Street Approach. So far, the program has eight Delaware towns as participating members. The City of Newark is a featured participant, whose Downtown Newark Partnership (DNP) can boast new events like *A Taste of Newark* and the gain of many additional businesses in the Main Street area (“About Us: What is the DNP”). Furthermore, through “economic stability, quality of place, and smart growth,” the Delaware Main Street program promotes the Livable Delaware agenda, an important statewide initiative discussed in the following section (“Delaware Main Street”).
Statewide Initiatives in Delaware

Livable Delaware Initiative

Governor Ruth Ann Minner unveiled a *Livable Delaware* agenda on March 22, 2001. Livable Delaware is a positive, proactive strategy that seeks to curb sprawl and direct growth to areas where the state, counties, and local governments are most prepared for it in terms of infrastructure investment and thoughtful planning. It builds on the foundation laid by the *Strategies for State Policies and Spending*, first approved in 1999 and comprehensively updated in 2004. Under the Livable Delaware agenda, the state provides assistance for local governments to support comprehensive land-use plans. It also better coordinates state agency planning, resource management, and investments in order to support growth where it is appropriate and planned for in order to discourage sprawl (“Gov. Ruth Ann Minner, Lt. Gov. John Carney Unveil ‘Livable Delaware’ Agenda to Control Growth”). Principles of Livable Delaware include:

- Guiding growth to areas that are most prepared for it in terms of infrastructure and thoughtful planning.
- Preserving farmland and open space.
- Promoting infill and redevelopment.
- Facilitating attractive, affordable housing.
- Protecting Delaware’s quality of life while slowing sprawl.

Delaware Statewide Pedestrian Action Plan

As part of the implementation of the Livable Delaware Initiative, Executive Order Number 83 was adopted March 6, 2006, to create an Advisory Council on Walkability and Pedestrian Awareness. The Advisory Council was charged to assist the Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT) with the development, adoption, and implementation of a *Delaware Statewide Pedestrian Action Plan*. The executive order focuses on the need to address the following issues in order to make walking a viable transportation option (“Executive Order Number Eighty-Three”):

- Ensuring that paths and sidewalks are continuous and interconnected where feasible.
- Developing consistent design standards for crosswalks, sidewalks and pathways.
- Clarifying maintenance responsibility for sidewalks.
- Reviewing traffic rules and driver behavior to help support a safer pedestrian environment.
- Promoting land-use and traffic patterns that encourage walking and reduce air pollution.

The goal of the three-phase plan is to achieve the state’s goal of “making walking central to personal fitness and mobility” (DelDOT, 43). Phase I of the Action Plan, a policy analysis
document, was completed in July 2007. This document examines federal requirements that support walkability and access; state sidewalk legislation, policies, regulations, and guidance; and sets forth a vision, goals, and recommendations to improve the walkability of a community. Based on identification of pedestrian concerns and issues, a vision statement for the plan was crafted that states the need to “improve the quality of life throughout Delaware by promoting safe and convenient pedestrian travel that enhances personal mobility, accessibility and fitness” (DelDOT, 43). To achieve this vision, four goals (followed by objectives and recommended actions for implementation) were set forth as follows, based on four key areas that emerged during the planning process (DelDOT, 44):

- Provide and promote pedestrian mobility, accessibility, and fitness.
- Revise and consolidate policies, plans, regulations, standards, and guidelines that ensure safe pedestrian access to all transportation facilities.
- Develop education programs and implementation strategies for pedestrian and other transportation facilities.
- Identify operation, maintenance, enhancement, and funding responsibilities for all pedestrian facilities.

Next steps involve implementation of preliminary Phase I recommendations, development of a Phase II Action Plan consistent with Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) guidelines, and a Phase III Implementation Plan (DelDOT, 52).

**Better Models for Development in Delaware**

Advancing the Livable Delaware agenda, The Conservative Fund has collaborated with the Livable Delaware Advisory Council’s Community Design Subcommittee and the Office of State Planning Coordination to publish Better Models for Development in Delaware. The publication identifies six principles for better development (McMahon, 4):

- Conserve farmland, open space, and scenic resources.
- Maintain a clear edge between town and countryside.
- Build livable communities.
- Preserve historic resources.
- Respect local character in new construction.
- Reduce the impact of the car.

In the Governor’s foreword, it is acknowledged that growth is inevitable; thus, it is important for communities to put into practice the models for better development in order to avoid hazardous growth—i.e., sprawl (McMahon, iv).

One way to combat leap-frog growth is to build livable communities. There is a growing demand among Delawareans to live in a “small town,” a place with a unique personality,
attractive homes, and a healthy design that promotes walkability. Building these livable communities entails (McMahon, 48-67):

- **Designing livable neighborhoods** – To provide a mix of homes and various communal destinations, such as schools, shopping centers, and public open spaces.
- **Using the Main Street model** – To strengthen the downtown area, which is crucial to a town’s vitality.
- **Remodeling commercial strips** – To move away from vehicle dependence and toward a pedestrian orientation.

### Livable Neighborhoods

The “Governor’s Guide to Livable Neighborhoods” is also part of the Livable Delaware initiative. Making neighborhoods more livable include policies that encourage active living and promote pedestrian-friendly design and multi-modal facilities. Active living can be done through the following (“Governor’s Guide to Livable Neighborhoods”):

- Implementing traffic-calming measures, such as neighborhood signs, speed bumps, speed cushions, gateway features, pinch points, cycle lanes, and pedestrian crossings.
- Making communities bicycle friendly.
- Implementing the safe routes to school program, which may include a “walking school bus” program and participation in International Walk to School Day.
- Reducing automobile dependency by such measures as rideshare, telework, Commute Trip Reduction program, carpools, and vanpools.

The abovementioned initiatives, both national and statewide, come to ultimate fruition when they are implemented at the local level through comprehensive plans and town codes—the topic of the next section.