

## What Works in . . . Communities - Active Environments



There are a number of important characteristics of the built environment that can have a positive impact on physical activity. Making these changes can create healthier communities, which are often referred to as **Active Community Environments (ACES)**

### Focus Areas

ACEs initiatives can include many components and activities. This document focuses on policy and environmental changes to increase physical activity and reduce chronic diseases. The following areas are highlighted, using specific activities or strategies to address each area:

- A – Provide Walkable And Bikeable Neighborhoods**
- B – Create And Maintain A Master Land-Use Development Plan**
- C – Provide Community Resources for Physical Activity: Accessible Parks, Recreation Facilities, And Open Spaces**
- D – Provide A Variety Of Public Transit Options**
- E – Provide A Safe And Pleasant Environment**
- F – Develop Coordinated Partnerships**

While each of these factors influences the relative convenience and likelihood of active transportation, it is the combination of these factors that is most critical to encourage pedestrian and bicycle trips. Increasing the levels of housing density won't result in much change if the neighborhood isn't safe. Similarly, if the neighborhood doesn't have sidewalks or nearby destinations to walk to, travel by car will always be the first choice. Planning for active community environments requires consideration of all these key factors in order to have the greatest impact.

A more detailed description of the strategies for each focus area and a summary of how to go about creating community change can be found in the Active Community Environments (ACEs) Resource Kit. The kit and other related information is on the Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity Program website at: <http://dhs.wisconsin.gov/health/physicalactivity> . Specific Active Community Environments (ACEs) is at: <http://dhs.wisconsin.gov/health/physicalactivity/Sites/Community/ACEs/index.htm> .

Note: Previous *What Works* documents divided the strategies by evidence level to show which strategies were the most evidenced-based. The initial version of this What Works document has not been stratified because of varying levels of evidence for many of the components. A later version will be completed to better reflect the latest evidence.

**for more information:** Department of Health and Family Services • Division of Public Health  
Wisconsin Nutrition and Physical Activity Program • PO Box 2659 • Madison WI 53701-2659  
<http://dhfs.wisconsin.gov/health/physicalactivity/index.htm> • 608.267.3694

## A. Provide Walkable And Bikeable Neighborhoods

### 1. Complete Streets

- Implement complete streets policies** to provide for the safe and convenient travel of all users of the roadway, including pedestrians, bicyclists, public transit users, motorists, children, seniors, and people with disabilities. (Ex: Require sidewalks in new development or widen existing sidewalks (5' wide and set back from the road); Create and maintain bike lanes; Narrow roadways to decrease car speed, etc.)
- Create community-wide or neighborhood maps** of walking and biking routes.
- Conduct neighborhood assessments** to identify opportunities for and barriers to active living. For a walkability and bikeability assessment checklist, go to:  
*Walkability:* <http://www.walkableamerica.org/checklist-walkability.pdf>  
*Bikeability:* <http://www.bicyclinginfo.org/pdf/bikabilitychecklist.pdf>  
*General:* <http://www.activelivingresearch.org/node/10616>

### 2. Connect Roadways

- Connect roadways** to complementary systems of trails and bicycle paths.
- Create separate trails, when possible.**
- Look for opportunities for Rails-to-Trails conversions.** Look to convert old railway lines into walking and biking trails. *Information and funding for Rails-to-Trails project can be found at:* <http://www.railstotrails.org/>
- Provide safe connections to nearby community destinations** such as parks, schools, retail stores, and workplaces. These active transportation systems will result in more physical activity opportunities and trips.

### 3. Master Plans (see Section B for more detailed information)

- Make traditional neighborhood development the standard** for residential areas. A grid design offers more route choices, shortens the average trip distance, and reduces the speed of motor vehicles.
- Encourage the adoption of pedestrian and bicycle plans**, which can be incorporated into city master plans and capital improvement programs.

### 4. School Location

- Place schools in population dense areas**, if possible. Building or renovating schools in neighborhoods that are easy to walk or bike to will increase physical activity.
- Encourage Safe Routes to School Programs.**  
*http://www.dot.wisconsin.gov/localgov/aid/saferoutes.htm. For online descriptions and pictures of Safe Routes principles, go to: http://www.saferoutesinfo.org/guide/index.cfm*

## B – Create And Maintain A Master Land-Use Development Plan

### 1. Smart Growth *For more information, go to [Smart Growth.org](http://SmartGrowth.org)*

- Encourage compact community design** with a higher population density and a tighter mixture of activities that make it possible to work, play, shop and go to school within walking and bicycling distance of people's homes.
- Mixed Use - Include provision for mixed use in area development.** Mixed-use areas promote physical activity because they locate residential buildings near retail stores, parks and other services industries.
- Establish the link between land use and transportation plans and priorities.** Approve local ordinances and other policies that are consistent with land use and transportation plans and that promote active living.
- Integrate health into smart growth considerations.** Consider the use of health impact assessments for development decisions. A health impact assessment serves as a tool to evaluate the health impact of any development project or policy (e.g., general plan, school siting, etc.). **General Site for Health Impact Assessment Information:** <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/hia.htm>  
**Healthy Development Measurement Tool:** *This tool, created by San Francisco comprehensive evaluation metric to consider health needs in urban development plans and projects.* <http://www.thehdm.org/>

### 2. Transit Oriented Development

- Consider multiple means of transit in development policies.**
  - **Develop around transit stops** (bus or rail). This encourages short walking or biking trips to use public transit to reach further destinations as well as access jobs, goods, and services that are near the public transit area.

- Street Network: align new streets and highways in a traditional grid pattern.**
- Create or update policies that affect funding,** street design and safety - all factors that increase active transportation.

**3. Mixed Use Neighborhoods**

- Support mixed-use development.** Creating a mix of retail, housing, and transit improves walkability and bikeability by creating convenient locations within a short distance of where people live.
- Promote focused development.** Concentrate commercial and retail development in town centers or in neighborhood locations at an appropriate scale to nearby residential housing.
- Establish enterprise zones** that enjoy favorable tax credits to attract businesses for mixed-use development.
- Support more population-dense housing** to increase potential pedestrian traffic to nearby destinations.

**4. Integrate with Pedestrian and Bicycle Plan**

- Develop a pedestrian and bicycle plan.**
- Incorporate pedestrian and bicycle plan into the community’s master plan and capital improvement programs.**
- Use your pedestrian and bicycle plan to advocate** the link between funding and regulations for active living environments that promote walking, bicycling, and public transit.

**C – Provide Community Resources For Physical Activity: Accessible Parks, Recreation Facilities, And Open Spaces**

**1. Locate Parks and Facilities to Serve all Populations**

- Inventory facilities and parks** and make a resource guide available to the public.
- Site parks and recreation facilities in neighborhoods. Create smaller, neighborhood parks** rather than large facilities that people have to drive to.
- Link parks, trails, and greenways to local destinations** of interest to ensure that walking and bicycling trips are as convenient as using a car.
- Establish parks in new subdivisions:** Include parks and playing fields in the plans for new subdivisions.
- Provide public transit to parks:** Encourage bus routes to access parks outside the city or neighborhood.
- Provide opportunities in underserved residential areas.**
- Work with community planners** to encourage urban redevelopment and infill.

**2. Offer Park & Recreation Programming**

- Offer active programming that encourages physical activity.** Parks and recreation programming (such as swimming, youth sports, etc.) will increase resident use. Education & prompts (signage) help.
- Consider programming that links to other community initiatives,** such as: Programs, Media Campaigns, Resource Guides, Advocacy Efforts & Funding Requests.
- Complete an assessment/audit** of your facility or park for “bikeability” and “walkability”.

**3. Allow Public Access to Multi Use Facilities**

- Establish joint use agreements** that allow use of public schools and other facilities for recreation by the public.
- Develop public facilities with a broad audience in mind.** Construct school and other facilities with a broader community use in mind.

**D – Provide A Variety Of Public Transit Options**

**1. Invest in Public Transit**

- Inventory transit routes** and note their routes in relation to recreational facilities in the community.
- Provide funding** for infrastructure to support walking and biking.
- Designate an assigned staff person** to be responsible for pedestrian and bicycle transportation.
- Invest in public transit to provide affordable and reliable multimodal transportation** options for all neighborhoods.
- Place transit stations within walking distance of population-dense areas** to provide the benefit of increased levels of daily walking along with decreased traffic congestion.
- Create commuter choice or other workplace incentive programs** that promote the use of public transit, ridesharing and active forms of travel.

## 2. Ensure the Ability to Walk & Bike to Destinations

- Locate schools within walking or biking distance** for many students will increase physical activity.
- Promote formal and Informal walking and biking programs.** Walking or biking to school builds a daily dose of physical activity into a student's day.
- Place public transit stations in key locations.** By increasing the availability of high quality transit service within walking distance of residential, work and shopping areas, you will also increase daily trips on foot.

## E – Provide A Safe And Pleasant Environment

### 1. Park and Neighborhood Design

- Design parks, trails, and greenways to deter crime and enhance safety.** Areas that are clean, well lit and are policed on a regular basis will attract more users.
- Create or update community-gathering places** as additional “destinations” and to help create a safe, walking environment.
- Create pleasant neighborhood settings.** Site design impacts travel patterns in much the same way as street design. Building design, orientation, and setback, along with other aesthetic considerations, will create environments that are either attractive or unattractive for non-motorized travel.

### 2. Vehicle Speed and Police Enforcement

- Control Vehicle Speeds.** Control the speed of cars and other traffic in neighborhoods, around schools, and in commercial areas.
- Enforce existing laws.** Improve policing and enforcement to help control speed of cars and stop crime. Use neighborhood watch programs to augment police efforts.

### 3. Neighborhood Association

- Design neighborhoods to be safe and aesthetically pleasing** to bring people together, encourage physical activity and decrease crime.
- Start neighborhood watch and safety walks** to create safe communities.
- Use the Neighborhood Association** as a major advocate for active living policies that affect the area.

### 4. Construction & Maintenance

- Ensure sufficient funding** to do regular maintenance, when required.
- Require sidewalks and cross walks** in new construction and considered in updates to existing roads
- Maintain sidewalks and crosswalks** so that they are safe for year-round use.

## F – Develop Coordinated Partnerships

### 1. Advocacy

- Develop and maintain an active living partnership,** coalition, task force or advisory board.
- Form new partnerships or use existing partners in key positions to advocate for active living environments.** Key partners would include local elected officials, city and regional planners, health department officials, school personnel and others with local interest. The broader the group, the greater voice they will have in policy development.
- Sit on local planning committees** or make sure a key partner is on the committee to advocate for active community environments.
- Incorporate healthy community development.** Make sure health considerations are part of the discussion when making decisions about community development.

### 2. Communications

- Collaborate with local organizations** to utilize their communications channels (e.g. newsletters, bulletin boards, websites and listservs) to promote active living.
- Develop active living messages** and an awareness campaign based on targeted community research (focus groups, surveys, and testing).
- Become a resource for the media and community** on active living issues.

### 3. Neighborhood Involvement

- Start with neighborhood scale change,** which is sometimes easier because it's on a more limited scope.
- Conduct neighborhood assessments** to identify opportunities for and barriers to active living. *For a walkability and bikeability assessment checklist, go to:*  
*Walkability:* <http://www.walkableamerica.org/checklist-walkability.pdf>  
*Bikeability:* <http://www.bicyclinginfo.org/pdf/bikabilitychecklist.pdf>  
*General:* <http://www.activelivingresearch.org/node/10616>