FACTS
Creating Spaces
Changing the Built Environment to Promote Active Living

OVERVIEW
The U.S. is in the grips of a full-blown obesity epidemic. More than 35% of adults and almost 17% of children are obese. In 2013, no state had an obesity rate of less than 20%. If current trends continue, 51% of adults will be obese by 2030. In light of these dire statistics, it is imperative to find ways to increase physical activity opportunities and recreational spaces where people live, work, learn, and play, and to promote ways to become or stay more physically fit. Nearly 80% of U.S. adults and 75% of adolescents do not currently get the recommended amount of physical activity each week. Adherence to the national recommendations is associated with a nearly 30% lower all-cause mortality among adults without existing chronic conditions.

To compound the problem, traditional transportation and community planning often overlooks the effect on health. Community planning and health behavior research consistently shows that how communities are built influences whether or not people use public transport, drive, walk, or cycle to get to their destination.

Integrating health considerations within community design – known as the built environment – would support more active communities. It is time to make our communities optimal for healthy living.

HEALTH IMPACT
Several studies have found that the way communities are designed and developed can have an effect on physical activity opportunities and obesity rates. Less walkable and safe, auto-dependent built environments have been correlated with obesity and cardiovascular disease. Integrating health considerations within community design – known as the built environment – would support more active communities. It is time to make our communities optimal for healthy living.

WAYS TO CREATE ACTIVE COMMUNITIES
• Safe Routes to School enables more children to safely walk and bike to school. Community leaders prioritize the safety of these routes and are working to reduce traffic congestion and improve health and the environment.
• Complete Streets policies consider the needs of all users in all transportation projects incorporating walking, bicycling, public transportation, and driving.
• Smart Growth Design communities are designed with active living as the focus. Communities are connected with street patterns that make it easy to walk or bike to destinations.

Additional research has found that building bike and pedestrian trails reduced health care costs associated with physical inactivity. For every dollar invested in building these trails, nearly $3 in medical cost savings may be achieved. Further, the ability to walk or bike through a neighborhood is a strong factor in determining property values.

Additional research indicates that:
• People who have parks or recreational facilities nearby and live in communities with well-connected streets walked more than those who did not have easy access.
• Lower-income communities often have fewer resources to support active lifestyles and places to play and exercise. Programs targeted to low-income, racially, and ethnically diverse children can increase active commuting and are associated with higher overall levels of moderate to vigorous physical activity throughout the day.
• Counties with pervasive poverty are less likely to invest in bike paths and pedestrian walkways.
• Community-based physical activity interventions are cost-effective, reducing new cases of many chronic diseases and improving quality of life.
Developers try to locate essential services like schools and stores closer to homes to encourage walking and provide green spaces for recreation.

- **Shared Use of School Facilities** agreements allow schools to share their physical activity facilities (gyms, running and walking tracks, multi-purpose rooms) with the community for recreation and exercise opportunities.

- **Transportation Enhancements** activities offer funding opportunities to help expand transportation choices in communities, including pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure and safety programs as well as conversion of abandoned railway corridors to trails.

- **Recreational Trails Program (RTP)** provides funds to the states to develop and maintain recreational trails and trail-related facilities for both non-motorized and motorized recreational trail uses. Federal transportation funds benefit recreation including hiking, bicycling, in-line skating, equestrian use, and cross-country skiing.

### THE ASSOCIATION ADVOCATES

The American Heart Association supports initiatives that create more livable and active communities. Policy recommendations include:

- Provide robust funding for the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP), which includes Safe Routes to School and transportation enhancements projects. Ensure that this money is given directly to the localities – as intended – to help communities address their unique needs.

- Support sustained concentrated funding to assist communities in implementing active transportation networks.

- Require state departments of transportation, metropolitan planning organizations, and local municipalities to adopt complete streets policies to consider the needs of all users in all transportation projects — whether walking, bicycling, public transportation, or driving — to reduce the need to retrofit existing roads and paths.

- Provide tax incentives to support school construction and physical activity facilities.

- Incorporate health impact assessments into community planning.

- Integrate shared use agreements into the existing federal and state programs and statewide recreation plans (SCORPs).

---


AHA/HPFS/04/2015