



Steps to Creating Healthy Communities

Implementing healthy community design is not a short-term project. These changes require engagement, understanding and action on the part of many people in the community.

To be successful, you must be both strategic and alert to opportunities. Developing new connections among community members is an essential first step in bringing the public health perspective, together with new approaches, skills and resources, into the community design process.

Vermonters generally care about health, active living and healthy eating. As a leader in the community, you are in the best position to articulate a compelling new rationale for effective land use planning and community design.

- **You can share relevant information**, data and evidence to support healthy community design decisions relating to bike paths, sidewalks, concentrated development, access to healthy food and a strong agricultural economy.
- **You can bring skills** in planning and grant writing to secure additional funding.
- **You can apply your organizational experience** to help engage community members, and to ensure follow-through on decisions and enforcement of local regulations and standards.

Toolkit ▶ *Key Messages*

The Vermont Prevention Model (depicted on page 2) outlines steps to create strategic and successful prevention programs. This process, described in this chapter, is helpful in assessing existing conditions and choosing best practices that fit the interests, energy and leadership in the community.

Assess

Begin by identifying the assets in your community, as well as areas for improvement, by conducting an assessment.

The *Healthy Community Design Assessment* in the Toolkit provides a set of broad questions directly related to the strategies in this guidebook. These questions can be used to:

- assess town plans and policies
- conduct assessments of the existing environment and resources
- evaluate public or private sector development/redevelopment projects
- consider municipal investments and budgets for public facilities and infrastructure

Tips for conducting your community assessment:

Gather health data that makes the case for change, and can be used to track the impact of adopted policy and changes in the community infrastructure over time. Health data is available through the district offices of the Vermont Department of Health and at the Health Department's website: www.healthvermont.gov.

Particular data to consider related to the built environment:

- Diabetes
- Heart disease and stroke
- Respiratory diseases
- Health problems that limit normal activity
- Overweight and obesity
- Physical activity
- Nutrition
- Traffic-related injuries

Identify existing community efforts that fit with some of your goals or strategies. Programs such as Safe Routes to Schools, growth center and downtown designations, Farm to Plate, and Farm to School initiatives may provide the foundation for collaborative action. It is far easier to join an existing effort than to start a new one. Address existing community concerns and needs first, in order to build trust, relationships and good will for future efforts.

Assess community capacity and readiness for investments, and infrastructure for active daily living and healthy foods. Determine signs of your community's capacity and readiness.

Review existing local plans and policies to determine how well they support health, active daily living and access to healthy food. This can be done by reviewing existing inventories and maps or conducting walk, bike and community food audits.

Toolkit ► *Healthy Community Design Assessment*

Toolkit ► *Signs of Readiness*

Toolkit ► *Recommended Resources: Tools for More In-Depth Assessment*

When reviewing a local plan or policy:

- Is there explicit language to promote and protect human health?
- Does it give priority to increasing opportunities for physical activity, walking and biking?
- Does it aim to increase access to fresh and healthy food?
- How could additional health language be added?

Key documents to review:

Town (municipal) plan establishes the comprehensive, long term vision and goals of the community, and determines the means for achieving those goals. Health-promoting language in the town plan sets in place an essential foundation for future community decisions.

Supplementary plans provide additional detail in support of the town plan. Your town may have a park and/or recreation plan, a trails plan, a bicycle or pedestrian master plan, or an energy plan that addresses non-motorized transportation.

Town bylaws, ordinances and codes are all forms of local regulation to implement local plans. Zoning and subdivision regulations cover growth, development, and associated impacts. Road policies and ordinances are key in creating safe places for biking and walking.

Town budgets allocate funding for municipal projects and demonstrate priorities for investments in community infrastructure. The yearly budget covers expenses for operations and management — e.g., snow plowing, road re-stripping and sidewalk repair. The capital budget is dedicated to future improvements in physical infrastructure (not maintenance) and a strategy for funding them.

Participate in development review as part of the public comment period or public hearing process to ensure that healthy community design is considered. Alternatively, share a basic project review checklist in advance with developers, site planners and local officials to help ensure that health issues are considered in the design of a proposed project.

Conduct health impact assessments (HIAs) for priority projects such as the siting of schools, grocery stores and housing. A health impact assessment (HIA) is a tool used by public health practitioners and local planners to evaluate the potential health impacts — both positive and negative — of a proposed municipal project, development proposal or local policy. Through the HIA process, current health data and epidemiological evidence of potential health impacts are brought into the discussion of alternatives. Instituting the use of HIAs as a standard practice would provide a means through which health outcomes are continually considered as town development decisions are made.

Toolkit ▶ *Recommended Resources: Health Impact Assessment Resources*

Tips from the field

- Trust the results of the community readiness assessment. Don't skip community organizing and capacity building, even if you think you have a great idea.
- Start small and slow: proposing projects that require large financial investments in a community with a low level of readiness will be counterproductive. Educate the community, and propose small, "do-able" projects to start.

Build Capacity

Community change is based on relationships and trust. Build relationships among health practitioners, planners and other public officials. Reach out to potential partners to form or strengthen personal relationships and mutual understanding.

Determine how public health staff or community partners can contribute time to attend meetings, provide public health data, assist with community assessments, and conduct public outreach.

Establish personal relationships with local officials who champion health issues, mixed-use development, walking, biking or recreation, or access to local foods.

Identify allies and partners who can assist with community assessment, outreach and action. Obvious key partners are staff with the Vermont Department of Health district offices, community health prevention coalitions or partnerships, hospital community team members, local planning officials, and downtown program managers. Community champions and volunteers provide critical leadership in local decisions and actions.

Offer time and assistance to engage community members, and find health resources to further the community's efforts.

Present the case for change to the community by providing data on the connections between health, land use and community policies to promote daily physical activity and increase access to healthy foods. Ideally, a presentation will combine:

- the benefits of walking and biking for chronic disease prevention
- the importance of traffic safety for injury prevention
- data on current population health status
- information on reported levels of physical activity
- an inventory of community infrastructure for walking and biking, physical activity and access to healthy foods

Prepare materials that articulate the connection to public health interests. These materials can be used in a variety of community education and outreach efforts.

Toolkit ▶ *Key Messages*

Toolkit ▶ *Vermont Health Facts*

Toolkit ▶ *Potential Partners*

Tips from the field

Find the “in” door with new partners:

- Find out what community members are interested in — what topics are creating a buzz in the community?
- Meet with leaders and brainstorm ways to align your goals for improving the health of the community.

Conduct broader outreach to engage community members in collecting accurate information, identifying opportunities for change, and influencing community decisions. Many healthy community design strategies will require political will, cooperation of local elected officials and private property owners, and community volunteer efforts.

Plan

Collecting data is important, but using data to inform decisions and actions is essential. Strategic planning uses data to identify opportunities and barriers, set priorities, and determine resources needed to take action. It's important to identify which of the action strategies best align with existing community dynamics, interests and opportunities. Efforts can then be strategic, using the results of your assessment and acting on opportunities that present themselves. Help your team prioritize all of the strategies you identified to work on.

Toolkit ▶ *Prioritizing Actions*

Implement

Once you have identified your strategies, you are ready to take action. See Chapter 4, *Action Strategies*, for ideas.

Monitor/Evaluate

Throughout this process, you will be identifying gaps, assets and goals. From the start, note what kind of changes you want to see in one, two, five, and even 10 years.

Set realistic short-term and long-term goals and identify how you will be able to tell when you've reached those goals.

Types of activities you may want to track:

- community assessment for health-related infrastructure completed
- funding for local recreation path secured
- town playground upgrades completed
- changes to town plan
- land secured for community garden site
- counts of people using new sidewalk, community garden, farmers' market sales

Once you begin implementing, monitor changes along the way. After one, two, five years — note your successes and celebrate!

Tips from the field

- Show up at town planning meetings and events — get yourself known.
- If invited to a planning commission or other committee, share health data and best practices.
- Organize a community presentation or training on the topic of the built environment and health.
- Publish articles or write letters to the editor that link healthy community design to current events — e.g., updating the town plan or getting ready for the new school year and pedestrian/bike safety.