

Local-Level Policy Can Have an Important Effect on Healthy Lifestyles

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People often tell me that being mayor is hard because the decisions of mayors and local governments affect people directly. People watch their local government and can respond to it instantly. Local government is “where the rubber hits the road.”

Most people spend their everyday lives in or near their hometowns. They are likely to spend most of their discretionary time in their neighborhoods. Their neighborhoods are where they make the bulk of their lifestyle decisions.

Local public policy has a major impact on the community and its neighborhoods and can have a significant impact on whether the citizens will choose to lead healthy lifestyles.

People instinctively want to live healthy lifestyles. Studies show people in general love being outdoors and active. Americans’ favorite outdoor activity is walking because people can combine it with many other interests such as being social, enjoying nature, walking the dog, strolling with the baby, or getting a good workout. Unfortunately, many Americans almost never walk; instead, they drive everywhere. But they would walk more and enjoy the healthy lifestyle benefits that result from activity were it not for the barriers built into our cities. One way to improve citizen’s healthy lifestyles is to develop local city design policies that take into account the need for walking and cycling and other opportunities for activity.

Most of our cities are designed and built around the automobile without regard to walking or bicycling. Neighborhoods are typically large areas of residences without sidewalks often on cul-de-sacs that are not interconnected and are without services, schools, employment, or entertainment within walking distances. In fact, nearly every need is outside of the neighborhood and widely spread out so that nearly everything is done by car. Between peoples’ car trips to and from work, school, shopping, and entertainment, there is little time or energy left for exercise. When in the car the temptation to resort to fast, fatty, high-calorie food is great. To make matters worse, many of the streets lack landscaping and are full of unregulated signs; they are just plain ugly and make the car trips dull and uninteresting. No wonder once the

day’s work and driving are over so many find flopping down and watching T.V. to be all they want to do.

Public policy that can change the design of cities to remove the barriers to activity and even provide incentives and inspiration to citizens to live an active lifestyle can be adopted with respect to planning and zoning, subdivisions, sign regulation, complete streets, mixed use, and park development and location.

Policies calling for higher density housing result in people having a greater number of nearby neighbors to socialize with and cities that can more efficiently provide services and amenities. Higher density housing residents are more likely to want to get out and do things such as walking together. When people walk together they tend to self patrol their neighborhoods, which reduces crime and encourages more activity.

Policies for mixed use residential areas result in services, schools, shopping, and libraries that can all be within walking or bicycling distance of peoples’ residences. If cul-de-sacs are interconnected by sidewalks or bikeways, walking and bicycling routes can be far more efficient than automobile routes that are blocked by the cul-de-sacs.

Policies for complete streets, that is streets with shared use lanes for automobiles and bicycles, and with separate bicycle lanes and sidewalks and landscaping, result in streets that everyone can use regardless of his or her choice of transportation. Because they are so convenient and pleasant to walk or bicycle on, such streets encourage people to use them for an activity based form of transportation.

Policies for a non-motorized transportation system (walking and bicycling) to be fully interconnected with residential areas and peoples’ destinations and public transportation will encourage a mode shift to active transportation.

Policies that call for parks and recreation facilities to be near where people live, such as a suitable neighborhood park within one-half mile of every residence with the parks interconnected with the neighborhood by sidewalks and trails and a regional park within three miles to be similarly interconnected, will encourage frequent and active use leading to a healthy lifestyle.

Other policies that encourage activity include designing intersections so that they are pedestrian and bicycle

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friendly, with cross walks, safety islands, countdown timers, and proper widths and geometry. Intersections are often very significant barriers to people even walking around their neighborhoods.

Smoking is devastating to a healthy lifestyle not only for smokers but also for non-smokers subjected to second hand smoke. A policy banning smoking in public places should be implemented.

It is also important to have policies to promote good nutrition, such as encouraging farmers markets, community gardens, and healthy foods at school.

We in Columbia, Missouri, have adopted or are adopting many of the policies discussed above. As examples, we have a complete streets policy. All new arterial and collector streets have sidewalks and bicycle lanes, shared use markings in the driving lanes and often

parallel joint use walking/bicycle paths called "Pedways," and well designed intersections. As the town expands there will be no more major streets acting as barriers to active living. As a federal demonstration project we are building an interconnected non-motorized transportation system throughout the city and promoting it in the hopes of obtaining a mode shift from cars to bicycles or walking. While we do not yet have actual counts, its success is obvious. Bicycles are everywhere and the trails and sidewalks are full of walkers. Our smoking ban includes bars and restaurants and is now very popular.

Local government's job is to enable as many people as possible to enjoy a satisfactory life. A healthy lifestyle adds to everyone's satisfaction in life. Local policies can and should enable and encourage people to live a healthier lifestyle.