

Land Use Planning and Public Health

Suzanne Cagle, University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension

"A healthy and fit nation is vital to America's strength and is the bedrock of the productivity, innovation, and entrepreneurship essential for our future. Healthy people can enjoy their lives, go to work, contribute to their communities, learn, and support their families and friends. A healthy nation is able to educate its people, create and sustain a thriving economy, defend itself, and remain prepared for emergencies."

Regina M. Benjamin, MD, US Surgeon General ¹

The Connection between Community Planning and Public Health

The physical structures and systems of a community have a significant impact on the health of its citizens. Ensuring healthy air and water quality and providing safe living and working environments were critical components of early land use and planning efforts around the country. While this history of a close connection between health and planning exists, over time, the focus of community planning shifted more to land use and transportation with public health viewed as the responsibility of health professionals. Most recently, however, as public health research has stepped up its investigations of chronic disease, the link between planning and health has become clearer. Zoning regulations that determine the location of grocery stores or farms have a secondary effect of determining the ease or difficulty of access to healthy, affordable food. Traffic



patterns and safe, continuous sidewalks affect residents' ability to reach community resources and be physically active. Despite these connections, in a 2011 Planning and Community Health Research Center Survey only 27 percent of respondents reported that their jurisdictions' officially adopted comprehensive plans explicitly address public health, while only three percent of all respondents reported that their jurisdictions' officially adopted sustainability plans explicitly address public health.² The National Prevention Council's National Prevention Strategy has identified Safe and Healthy Communities as one of its top strategic priorities.¹

Community Planning and the Obesity Crisis

The United States has seen a dramatic increase in obesity rates from 1990 through 2010. The same is true in New Hampshire with the obesity rate reaching 25 percent in 2010. A community's "built" environment can have a striking effect on its residents' weight and general health: facets such as access to healthy food, safe places for physical activity and recreation, stores, schools, and services close enough to homes to encourage walking or biking, and safe sidewalks and pedestrian crossings.⁴

Adult Obesity Facts

More than one-third (78.6 million) of adults in the United States are obese. Obesity-related conditions include heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and certain types of cancer, some of the leading causes of preventable death. The estimated annual medical cost of obesity in the U.S. was \$147 billion in 2008 U.S. dollars; the medical costs for people who are obese were \$1,429 higher than those of normal weight.³ CDC.gov

How to Infuse Health into Community Planning and Policies

The Health Impact Assessment (HIA)

A Health Impact Assessment describes and calculates the potential health impact, both positive and negative, of a community development plan, project or policy, before it goes into effect. This process brings public health considerations to the attention of officials and citizens before decisions with possibly adverse health consequences become irreversible and early enough to expand on a project's potential positive health outcomes. An HIA establishes matters of health as important as project costs, timing, or intended outcomes.

Key factors of HIA's include:

- Applicability to a broad array of policies, programs, plans, and projects;
- Consideration of adverse and beneficial health effects;
- Ability to consider and incorporate various types of evidence; and
- Engagement of communities and stakeholders in a deliberative process.⁵



Spotlight: The Health Impact Assessment for the Second Street Corridor Project, Manchester, NH ⁶

Manchester, New Hampshire initiated its Second Street Corridor Project to develop access management strategies and a mixed use zoning district for a portion of Second Street. The end goals were to make the corridor safer and more useful for all modes of traffic and stimulate economic growth and development.

In 2013, the Southern New Hampshire Planning Commission along with the city of Manchester completed an HIA of this project in order to examine existing conditions that might impact the planning process, determine how the project would change the lives of residents (both during and upon completion) consider opportunities for improvement, and recommend feasible options to promote healthy living.

A series of public sessions afforded a context for a two-way exchange of information and concerns by the planners and residents, with an explicit focus on public health. The participants took part in a walking tour of the area of Second Street being assessed, a visioning session where design ideas and images from residents were integrated into the planning, and a review of the neighborhood's demographic and other characteristics, transportation infrastructure, and access to healthy food.

The stakeholders identified top issues related to barriers to physical activity, traffic safety, and access to healthy food/grocery stores. Specific recommendations developed include:

- Fill in the gaps in sidewalks, improve the quality of existing infrastructure and remove barriers to handicap accessibility.
- Develop a transportation master plan that encourages planning for all modes of travel.
- Consider zoning incentives that encourage a mix of business and retail that will provide essential services, healthy food outlets, and jobs.

Nutrition Environment Measures Survey:

The Nutrition Environment Measures Survey (NEMS) was developed by the University of Pennsylvania in order to more accurately assess a community's food environment. It includes a survey of community and consumer nutrition environments- including the types and locations of food outlets, the availability of healthful choices and information, and the pricing, promotion, and placement of healthier food products.⁷ Through accurate assessment of the food environment, planners are better able to identify challenges and opportunities for change.

Spotlight on New Hampshire Communities: Using NEMS in the Upper Valley Lake Sunapee Region

The Upper Valley Lake Sunapee Regional Planning Commission is using NEMS as part of its local Food Source Mapping project. Planners seek to identify access points and barriers to healthy food products in the community. Local residents are pitching in to inventory and assess food sources in their own communities, indicating the presence of healthy food options and how easy or difficult it is especially for low income residents to access healthy foods. For more information, visit: <http://www.uvlsrc.org/>



Building Connection and Collaboration between Public Health and Planning Professionals

Removing barriers, improving communication, and engaging in authentic collaboration are critical to ensuring that planning initiatives effectively address public health concerns. In 2012, The American Planning Association (APA) noted that community planning decisions are linked to some of the most intractable public health problems, including adult and childhood obesity, cancer, respiratory problems, inactivity, and environmental justice. The APA recommends ongoing collaboration and education between planning and public health professionals. "As planners have a stronger understanding of their role in shaping public health outcomes—along with health officials, political leaders, nongovernmental organizations, as well as individuals—they can contribute to creating built environments that support healthy living throughout the life cycle."⁸

Spotlight on New Hampshire Communities: HEAL NH

Healthy Eating, Active Living NH is a network of state and community partners dedicated to advancing population-based approaches to reduce the prevalence of obesity and chronic disease in New Hampshire. Since 2008, HEAL has worked to support initiatives that bring together community partners across all sectors, and build collaboration towards long term meaningful change. HEAL coalitions are currently working on initiatives in 13 New Hampshire Communities.

For more information, visit: <http://healnh.org/>



Resources to learn more about planning and public health:

National Prevention Strategy, National Prevention Council, US Surgeon General
<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/initiatives/prevention/strategy/report.pdf>

Healthy Planning: An evaluation of comprehensive and sustainability plans addressing public health, American Planning Association
<https://www.planning.org/research/publichealth/pdf/evaluationreport.pdf>

Land Use Planning for Public Health: The Role of Local Boards of Health in Community Design and Development, National Association of Local Boards of Health
<http://www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/publications/landusenalboh.pdf>

Nutrition Environment Measures Survey: <http://www.med.upenn.edu/nems/about.shtml>

¹ National Prevention Council, National Prevention Strategy, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General, 2011.

^{2,8} Ricklin, A., et al. 2012. Healthy Planning: an evaluation of comprehensive and sustainability plans addressing public health. Chicago: American Planning Association

³ <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/adult.html>

⁴ NALBOH, Land Use Planning for Public Health: The Role of Local Boards of Health in Community Design and Development, 2006

⁵ <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/hia.htm>

⁶ Second Street Corridor Project Health Impact Assessment, Southern New Hampshire Planning Commission, 2013

⁷ <http://www.med.upenn.edu/nems/about.shtml>



For More Information:

Molly E. Donovan
UNH Cooperative Extension
Molly.Donovan@unh.edu
603.862.5046
www.extension.unh.edu

George O. Reagan
New Hampshire Housing
greagan@nhhfa.org
603.310.9253
www.nhhfa.org

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