

A place that's fit to live in

Cities and towns that shape active, healthy lifestyles

By Susan deFrancesco

In 2016, Charlottesville collaborated with a number of partners for a demonstration project, Streets that Work LIVE, that showed how new guidelines might be used on a Charlottesville street. The demonstration showed many features of a complete street, including curb extensions, climbing bike lanes, planters and outdoor seating. Photo courtesy of City of Charlottesville.

IN THEIR ROUTINE course of business, municipal leaders make many health decisions, though they may not realize it. Yes, decisions made about zoning, transportation, planning, and parks and recreation policies affect the health of a city's or town's residents.

Only about 10 to 20 percent of a person's health is related to access to health care and the quality of health care services received, according to research by the Project for Public Spaces. A person's health and the decisions they make regarding their health is shaped more by the social, economic and physical environments in which they live. These are environments that local government leaders can help shape into healthy communities that encourage and support healthy, routine behaviors like eating healthy and being physically active.

Among the 26 cities and towns in Virginia that have joined the Healthy Eating Active Living Campaign, there are a wealth of ways that municipal leaders are shaping the environment to promote healthy eating and active living.

Active living

Activity-friendly environments that encourage walking, bicycling and active play and recreation can encourage people to be more active. One important way that municipalities can give residents more opportunities to walk and bicycle is by adopting and implementing transportation policies and practices that create complete streets – streets that are designed and operated to be safe and accessible for all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and transit riders of all ages and abilities.

Design features that promote walking and bicycling include sidewalks, bike lanes, special bus lanes, comfortable and accessible public transportation stops, frequent and safe crossing opportunities, median islands, accessible pedestrian signals, curb extensions, narrower travel lanes, and roundabouts.

Charlottesville is a Platinum HEAL City. The city's adoption and implementation of its Streets that Work Design Guidelines helped it earn this top-level recognition. The guidelines,

Healthy Lifestyles

introduced by City Councilmember Kathy Galvin, incorporate complete streets principles, providing guidance for street design that ensures the city's streets meet the needs of pedestrians, cyclists, transit users, drivers, residents, workers, visitors and business owners.

"When people can safely walk or bike through the city, it encourages exercise, puts fewer cars on the street, and makes it a healthier place for everyone," says City Councilmember Kristin Szakos.

Haymarket, a Bronze Level HEAL town, has prioritized work on its pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure. Its street

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enhancement project has involved stamping crosswalks and providing bike lines to provide safe access for pedestrians and bicyclists.

"The town is so excited. Right on the horizon is the pedestrian path tie-in to Haymarket, just on the outskirts north of our town limits. This will be wonderful for those who wish to shop, dine, and tour our town. It will allow for easy access by walking or biking," says Denise Andrews, Interim Town Clerk.

Similarly, Bronze Level HEAL city Middleburg completed a streetscape project along Washington Street, its busy main street, in partnership with the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT). The project installed new amenities to promote walking and pedestrian safety. These include new pedestrian-scale street lights, as well as new intersection curb extensions and brick crosswalks that increase safety when crossing.

"Pedestrian safety is a top priority for Middleburg to safeguard our residents and many visitors. The project not only improved safety for all, but also enhanced the quality of our streetscape, which promotes business investment and tourism in our community," says Town Administrator Martha Mason Semmes.

Lovettsville, a HEAL town that has achieved Gold Level status, has invested in two major streetscape projects. One project is along the town's Main Street that allows for pedestrian access to a Community Center and future County park. The other project involves constructing a shared use path that supports bicycle mobility across the town and connects pedestrians to the Town Square. The town's Council approved a Capital Improvement Plan and a Budget Strategy that prioritizes the streetscape projects and the Town has already completed half of these projects.

According to Laszlo Palko, Town Manager, "The Lovettsville Town Council and residents have stressed the importance of making Lovettsville a pedestrian-friendly community that encourages healthy living through walking and riding bicycles to community events, commercial spaces, and public facilities such as our wonderful parks. Nowhere is this more evident than in Lovettsville's unique Town Square where pedestrian access is provided to a central Town Square park, a bicycle park, and outdoor dining options."

Another important way in which municipalities can promote active living is by providing safe and accessible parks and recreational facilities. According to the National Recreation and Park Association, "public park and recreation agencies create healthy communities and play a fundamental role in enhancing the physical environments in which we live...They foster change through collaborative programs and policies that reach a vast population."

The town of Crewe, Virginia's first HEAL community, and a Gold Level member, has adopted a Park Improvement Plan. A multi-pronged effort, the Plan provides physical improvements to the town park to increase accessibility, safety, and recreation opportunity.

To date, HEAL partners have worked to build an attractive bridge and a regulation-size outdoor volleyball court in the park. They have also requested and received a VDOT study on the feasibility of a crosswalk over the busy route 460 highway, connecting the residential neighborhood to the park. Future



To help citizens eat healthier, Staunton changed its zoning code to allow residents to own backyard hens.

Garden plots in several Charlottesville parks are rented annually with first priority to those renters who live within a quarter-mile of the plots. Rental prices for plots range from \$30 to \$50 for city residents.

Photo courtesy of City of Charlottesville.



initiatives in the park include creating signage that would display the distance from a given point and approximate calories burned and establishing an attractive kiosk that would publicize organized physical activities and access to local, nutritious food.

“For Crewe, HEAL is about creating opportunity for our citizens and visitors. It’s about quality of life. The more healthy access we provide, the happier and healthier people become. And this translates to economic opportunity, because a happy, healthy community is a place where people want to raise a family, own a business, and visit often,” says Town Councilmember Phil Miskovic.

The HEAL town of Roanoke, has 20.9 miles of greenway trails, 57.1 miles of natural surface trails and 70 parks. According to the town’s Director of the Department of Parks and Recreation, Michael Clark, “Plentiful, well-maintained public parks and strong recreational programming not only help to build community, but also improve overall livability and stimulate economic development. Studies have shown that parks and recreation services have contributed to measurable decreases in crime rates while improving overall physical and mental well-being throughout the community.

“To that end, our planning practices engage members of our community in determining the strategic direction of the department,” Clark adds. “Every five years, the department holds a series of meetings with interested citizens, stakeholders, and focus groups to gather the information necessary to craft both a statistically valid, mailed survey as well as an open, community-wide survey. The responses from these surveys help craft the department’s comprehensive master plan.”

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Phil Miskovic, Crewe Town Councilmember

removed the restrictions in our zoning code that had previously prevented residents from owning backyard hens,” explained Councilmember Erik Curren, who sponsored the change.

According to Curren, though the proposal generated some controversy at the time, in the years since its passage, “Hens have become beloved members of nearly a dozen households as well as good neighbors across the city.”

The Town of Lovettsville entered into an agreement with

Healthy eating

Creating an environment where healthy foods are available and accessible allows people to make healthier food choices. Zoning regulations and land use practices can promote greater access to healthy food as exemplified in the activities of several HEAL cities and towns.

Through a Park Master Plan Amendment and extensive community involvement, Charlottesville provides rental community garden plots in its Rives Park to promote local agriculture and greater access to healthy food.

“The gardens have been well received by the neighborhood and are actively being used. It is a very nice amenity for this park,” reports Brian Daly, Director of Parks and Recreation in Charlottesville.

Staunton, a Bronze Level HEAL city, passed an ordinance to allow citizens to keep up to six hens in residential areas.

“To help citizens eat healthier and especially offer low-income families a way to supplement their food budgets, Staunton

“Our community garden initiative has helped ensure access to healthy vegetables for our residents as the town lacks a grocery store.”

Laszlo Palko, Lovettsville Town Manager

the Lovettsville Garden Club to provide a piece of the Quarter Branch Park to the club for the construction of a community garden for town residents. Town residents have created garden plots and maintain the garden.

“Our community garden initiative has helped ensure access to healthy vegetables for our residents as the town lacks a grocery store. Besides land, the town provides water to the community garden, too,” explains Laszlo Palko, Town Manager.

Comprehensive plans

Comprehensive plans, general plans and master plans serve as a local government’s official statement and vision for its future long-range development. These plans offer municipalities the opportunity to envision and plan for the development of a healthy community by including goals and policies that promote access to healthy food and active living.

This is sometimes accomplished by incorporating healthy eating and active living goals and policies throughout the plan’s chapters or “elements” – those chapters, for example, related to transportation, land use, and recreation and parks. Some localities also include a separate chapter on health in their comprehensive plan.

Lawrenceville’s 2015-2035 Comprehensive Plan is under review for adoption. The draft plan expresses the intent of the Town Council to “support healthy living initiatives that improve the health and quality of life for residents.” Mayor Bill Herrington explains that “the town’s commitment to improving the health of the community is a priority and has gotten stronger as evidenced by the inclusion of language expressing that commitment in the Comprehensive Plan.”

The HEAL city of Hopewell’s recent revisions to its comprehensive plan include a chapter dedicated to public health. The plan also integrates the relationship between health, land use, and the built environment throughout the plan. The city worked on the revisions with the Institute for Public Health Innovation and a public health student from the University of Virginia.

Tevya Williams Griffin, Director of Neighborhood Assistance Planning, notes that “the urban planning field was birthed out of concerns for public health, including tenement housing, and water and sewage systems. It should be no surprise that ‘place’ matters, and that one’s environment, along with other factors, can have positive or negative effects on overall health.”


According to Griffin, the impetus for the work on the comprehensive plan was the fact that the city was ranked 129 out of 133 in the 2014 County Health Rankings Report and community survey responses revealed that public health was an issue that many believed should be addressed. The city’s work on the comprehensive plan will be completed by summer/fall of 2017. Griffin reports that the city’s health ranking is now 118 out of

134 and that Hopewell “is on its way to becoming a healthy city and our children will be better for it.”

Williamsburg, a Platinum Level HEAL City, has included in its comprehensive plan land use and land regulation goals that promote mixed-use, transit-oriented development. The city has provided funding in its Capital Improvement Plan to implement mixed-use development that promotes walkability in many parts of the city.

The city uses a unique budgeting strategy centered on the development of Goals, Initiatives, and Outcomes (GIO’s) each biennium. These GIO’s are the result of significant public engagement and are coupled with performance measures to ensure the work is completed.

During the 2015-2016 biennium, the GIO’s included nine projects aimed at developing a healthier built environment. Six of these projects have been completed and the remaining three are planned for FY18.

Assistant City Manager Andrew Trivette says, “The HEAL initiatives align nicely with the city’s vision for an innovative livable community. The 18 policy initiatives that resulted from the HEAL program have helped to inspire a transformed Williamsburg.” 

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HEAL Cities and Towns Campaign

HEAL Cities and Towns Campaign staff offers free technical assistance on building healthy community environments. For more information and to learn how to become a HEAL city or town, visit www.healthcitiesmidatlantic.com or contact Campaign Manager Susan DeFrancesco at 240-252-2016.

The HEAL Cities & Towns Campaign, funded by Kaiser Permanente, is a project of the Institute for Public Health Innovation that provides free technical assistance to cities and towns working to create healthy food and physical activity environments.

American Planning Association

The American Planning Association’s Plan4Health project works to leverage the role of planners as collaborators and conveners to improve community health. It provides tools and technical support to planners so they can integrate health into planning practice at all levels. The Virginia Chapter of the American Planning Association offers networking and professional development to its members and is committed to raising the awareness about the many benefits planning offers as a foundation for addressing physical, economic, and social changes that promote healthy eating and active living. For more information about the APA Virginia Chapter contact Eldon James, Chapter Administrator at admin@apavirginia.com.