

DRAFT

PUBLIC HEALTH CONSIDERATIONS IN COMMUNITY PLANNING

As stated in Chapter 1, community planning is intended to develop a physical, economic, and social environment that improves the social welfare of a community's residents. Implicit in the planning process is the assumption that to the extent practicable humans plan and develop the kind of communities in which they choose to live and, in turn, are affected in very fundamental ways by the outcomes of the planning and development process. Nowhere is this more evident than in the health status of a community's residents. There have been scores of studies showing the relationship between development's negative effects on the environment and the adverse effects on the health status of communities. Indeed, billions of public and private dollars have been expended over decades to regulate and to remediate the harm to the environment caused by the unintended consequences of development. More recently, community planning has progressed beyond simply complying with the mandates of regulatory agencies in order to incorporate creative approaches to developing healthy communities. Proponents of this approach to planning contend that by incorporating space that promotes healthy lifestyles into the planning process a community can improve the health of its residents and significantly reduce the expenditure of healthcare dollars.

On the national level, organizations such as the Project for Public Spaces and Active By Design recognize that there is a link between how our communities are designed and health status. Closer to home, the Center for Active Living and Healthy Communities at Plymouth State University in New Hampshire has reported that rural New Englanders are at greater risks than residents of urban or suburban communities. This is due in part by the lack of opportunity to integrate healthy physical activity into the routine of normal life. Rural sprawl has resulted in the need to drive considerable distances to work, schools and shopping. The issue of physical inactivity and obesity play significant roles in most chronic diseases, including stroke, heart disease, and diabetes. Specifically:

- Physical inactivity and poor diet are responsible for 100,000 to 300,000 American deaths annually from heart disease, colon cancer, stroke, and diabetes.
- One third of deaths from heart disease can be attributed to lack of physical activity. Inactive adults are nearly twice as likely as active adults to have heart disease.
- Approximately 10% of Americans have Type 2 diabetes, a disease influenced by physical activity. Inactivity is an issue of increasing concern among providers of child healthcare.
- Physical inactivity strongly increases obesity. A 2004-2004 survey by the National Health and Nutrition Survey showed that more than two-thirds of adults are either overweight or obese, with 32% of adults qualifying as obese.
- Among children aged 2 to 19. Almost 34% were overweight or at risk of overweight, with 17% meeting the criteria for overweight, resulting in our "obesity epidemic".

- Self-reported quality of life was significantly higher for physically active adults than it was for inactive adults.

Advocates of the “public health/ community design connection” argue that our cities and towns no longer integrate opportunities for physical activity or social interaction into the planning and development processes. One national study found that people living in sprawling low-density areas walk less, weigh more, are more likely to be obese, and are more likely to suffer from hypertension than people who live in more “walkable” communities. There is a need to emphasize a more compact and mixed land use pattern that offers short distances to necessary and interesting destinations. There should be pedestrian friendly thoroughfares that encourage integrating healthy physical activity into the routine of daily life. Residents in communities designed with public health issues in mind engage in 70 minutes more of moderate to vigorous physical activity per week than do residents of sprawling communities. As the Project for Public Spaces notes, “A beautifully designed space is not worth anything if people do not use it.” It is essential that there be commercial, recreational and social attractions in order to encourage residents to promote use and the consequent physical activity. And where there is use, there must be the amenities that make places appealing and enjoyable and make residents feel good about being in public places. Sidewalks, regulated vehicular traffic, benches, or small centrally located parks are essential to healthy communities as well as to commercial success.

In addition to making the destinations of daily life more pedestrian-friendly, the presence of parks, greenways, and hiking trails can increase healthful physical activity. One survey indicated that adults with access to parks were nearly twice as likely to be active as those without access. Walking trails have been shown to be particularly well-used and beneficial among women. And greenways (i.e., corridors of protected land along waterways or other scenic locations) have been rated as contributing the most to health and fitness in some communities. In commenting on the Plymouth State University report, the major newspaper in Central Maine stated that

Along with a healthy diet, exercise is the best way to prevent many chronic diseases. That should be part of the equation when we make land-use decisions, and it should be factored into the cost of building amenities such as hiking trails, parks and sidewalks in rural communities.

The emergence of a public health/community design approach to planning and development takes into account several important issues. One is that healthy communities make for healthy individuals. That is, by integrating into the physical environment features that encourage physical activity a culture of healthy living is being encouraged. **There is a shift in focus from changing unhealthy behaviors of individuals to creating a community where healthful living is the norm.** A walk to a farmers’ market replaces a drive to a fast food outlet. A school curriculum on good nutrition not only reinforces the benefits of fresh produce over processed food, it is of economic benefit to local growers or perhaps promotes community gardening which in itself is a healthy

physical activity. And land that might otherwise go to increasing sprawl is put to more productive use. Similarly healthful recreational opportunities can become routine part of daily life and contribute to the economic vitality of the community. Hiking, biking, rowing, kayaking, tennis, swimming, golf or other outdoor activities which may be available can be integrated into physical education programs, lead to retail or manufacturing opportunities for the community, and the referral to specific programs may be part of local healthcare providers referral patterns.

Another important element of a public health approach to community planning is the effect that it can have on healthcare expenditures. It has been estimated that expenditures could be reduced by as much as 25% if the following were to occur:

- Individuals were to consume 5 fruits and/or vegetables daily;
- Individuals were to engage in physical activity 30 minutes per day 5 days per week;
- Smokers were to stop smoking; and,
- Alcohol consumption were to be moderate.

Winthrop has a headstart over most small towns in Maine in attaining the benefits of a healthy community because many of the required resources are readily available. There are a dozen lakes/ponds located in whole or in part within the borders of the town. These resources provide opportunities for kayaking, canoeing, open-water and ice fishing, skating, snowshoeing, and a number of other water sports and activities. Mt. Pisgah and the trails around the Winthrop schools means that hiking and nature walking is available to the entire community in easily accessed locations. As is detailed in the section of this plan on recreation, Winthrop has a full range of facilities for the traditional sports such as football, soccer, baseball, basketball, skateboarding, etc. A local organic farmer has made land and technical assistance available to residents interested in growing their own produce. An active farmers' market has become a fixture in the town. Winthrop is one of the few small towns in Maine with a defined downtown and a network of sidewalks that allow residents to park their cars and walk through the town. However, to fully realize the benefits of the resources which can contribute to making Winthrop a healthy community a cultural change will be essential. All sectors of the community must participate. Public facilities such as the Bailey Library, Town Hall, etc., should be used to display and distribute information about activities available to the community. Schools should incorporate opportunities for an active lifestyle into the curriculum. Churches and other community organizations should sponsor bird watching and nature walks, particularly for residents who might not otherwise have a chance to exercise and socialize. The healthcare provider community needs to "prescribe" exercise and diet the same way they do medication, and "referrals to a hiking or kayaking program should be handled in a manner similar to the referrals to the traditional medical therapy or rehabilitation programs. Public Safety personnel have an especially important role in facilitating the residents' availing themselves of the opportunities for an active life.

The quality or quantity of resources in the community will not matter if public safety concerns are an impediment to people using them. For understandable reasons, parents find it more comforting to drive their children to and from an organized athletic event than they do to allow their children to go hiking for an afternoon with their friend. It is also unlikely that many senior citizens who live alone are willing to take a solitary nature walk in an isolated rural area. Clearly no community can afford to provide assurances to all residents at all times in all locations. However, Public Safety personnel can be the source of reliable information concerning the real crime threats present in the community. And they can be technical assistants to other responsible individuals (e.g., volunteers from scouting organization) who might volunteer to oversee a group of younger children who want to spend a day hiking or cycling. Moreover, the police department could be kept informed of events that are happening within the community. The point is that concern about public safety should not be a barrier to improving the quality of life now or into the future. To not participate in physical activities that can provide enjoyment and healthful benefits on a life-long basis creates other long-term problems. Twenty-five percent of Maine's high school students are obese. Fifty eight percent of this population has one risk factor for cardiac disease. Twenty percent have two risk factors. A child who watches television 4 hours a day is far more likely to be obese than a child who watches only 1 hour of television and participates in physical activities. It is essential that concern about public safety be addressed in an effective and cost efficient way if future public health crises are to be avoided.

There is evidence that a physical environment that helps to create a culture of healthy living can be a major contributor to achieving these steps. But we know that physical health is only one component to health.

The Maine Network of Healthy Communities has a vision that: All of Maine's communities enjoy a sense of health that includes limited disease, as well as optimal physical, mental, social, emotional, environmental, and economic well-being. People living and working in Maine are healthy, not just because of access to appropriate medical services, but also because of neighborhood vitality, satisfying employment, safe environments, and diverse recreational, educational and cultural opportunities.

Many of the principles of the public health/community design connection are incorporated into Winthrop's updated Comprehensive Plan. They are found in the recommendations for the development of a revitalized Main Street (including the offerings of special events); walking paths and small park-like area in the downtown area; the development of bicycling and hiking pathways and trails; the preservation and improvement of recreational sites such as Mt. Pisgash, Norcross Point, and town beaches; the rethinking of regulations for agricultural and animal husbandry regulations; and in the sections dealing with the sites for future housing development. However, if the future of the town were to develop in the way envisioned in the plan, the creation of a culture of healthy living will call for the participation of more than elected or appointed local officials. The existing healthcare system, the education system, the business community

and civic organization all will have to assume active roles in making the connection between public health and community development. If done correctly, all constituents stand to benefit.

Winthrop residents and guests enjoy the benefit of being in close proximity to many excellent health care services. MaineGeneral Health houses multiple practices in the Winthrop Commerce Center (old Mill building) everything from physician practices that are innovators in the Medical Home model to lab services to mammograms and other imaging services to orthopedic services. There are multiple chiropractors practicing in town offering a variety of wellness services including massage, acupuncture, reflexology and diet counseling. There is a long standing and growing dental practice. Winthrop offers at least two physical therapy offices and an optometrist. There are two long-term care facilities. Both Rite Aid and Hannaford offer a full pharmacy. Community mental health services are provided in town by Kennebec Behavioral Health and others. Crisis and Counseling and MaineGeneral Health also provide mental health services within the community. Former Winthrop High School students ages 18 – 24 are eligible to receive three free mental health sessions through Kennebec Behavioral Health, Crisis and Counseling, or MaineGeneral EAP through Winthrop's Porch Light program.

Healthy Futures is a nonprofit community-based organization that has been providing numerous health services to Winthrop and surrounding communities free of charge since 1997. The Health Advocates provide multiple services from wellness consultation to blood pressure checks to nutritional advice to on-line health assessments with coaching.

When serious illness or injury happens, Winthrop has the unique advantage of being within half an hour of two of the four largest hospitals in Maine – MaineGeneral Medical Center in Augusta and Central Maine Medical Center in Lewiston. Winthrop has police, fire, and ambulances service that is right in town to quickly help those in need.

Winthrop also has a long tradition of helping one another through the Winthrop Food Bank. This volunteer service provides a necessary safety net to those struggling financially. Winthrop has also traditionally offered a community garden where residents who do not have access to fertile land of their own may go and grow a garden. Through the summer months, Winthrop has a Farmers' Market that offers fresh fruit and vegetables and more.

Recommendations: Winthrop would like to be a community where healthy choices are freely available; where it is easy and enjoyable to go for a walk, a bike ride, a swim, or snow shoeing. We want to be a community where healthy choices are the norm and easily reinforced. We want to be a place where there are interesting things to see and do and where people have good jobs that pay a living wage so everyone can live in safe and adequate housing and have good food on the table. We want our residents and guests to have access to good health care when they need it but, even more importantly, we want them to have good health if at all possible.

1. Support safe bike and walking trails especially
 - a. In and around the downtown

- b. With a trail from town along the backside of Mt. Pisgah
 - c. With a trail that connects Winthrop to Manchester and ultimately to Augusta.
 - d. Provide safe storage for bikes in the downtown, Mt. Pisgah, each school, and other destination areas. Offer reduced cost bike helmets to residents of all ages.
2. Encourage multiple aspects of a recreational economy including:
- a. Encouraging businesses that support physical activity such as kayak and bike rentals, a hunting and fishing store, a skate shop, etc.
 - b. Improvements to our public beach area
 - c. Make sure our regulations support health and physical activities and the businesses that would promote them.
 - d. Adoption of a plan so visitors can use our public beach in specific situations (such as if they are also renting bikes or kayaks at a Winthrop business)
 - e. The development of a formal program of summer events at Norcross Point
3. Support a well-established community garden that offers fruits and vegetables to Winthrop residents (especially its children) through an innovative program that makes eating “5 a day” the norm rather than the exception.
4. Support the health and well-being of our senior population:
- a. Support multiple well-organized community activities for seniors (trips to Monmouth Theater, special programs at the Performing Arts Center, bridge tournaments, writing you memoir)
 - b. Consider providing a senior program to the existing Winthrop YMCA program
 - c. Support the development of senior housing in the downtown
 - d. Incorporate healthy spaces planning for seniors where they can enjoy walking outdoors (such as the Mill Stream path) and have informal places to socialize (such as Ned’s was) indoors.
5. Work with the school to incorporate an approach to healthy lifestyles throughout its curriculum for example
- a. offer healthy cooking classes or
 - b. field trips to an organic farm or
 - c. physical education classes with daily walking of the trails behind the high school or
 - d. suggest community service hours working at the community garden

6. Support healthy child visits to provide bike helmets at appropriate ages (like they provide age-appropriate books) and to sell bike helmets at cost. Provide education to local health care providers about all the healthy things to do in Winthrop.
7. Use the public library to reinforce healthy lifestyles
 - a. Have library lend bike helmets or sell them at a discounted cost.
 - b. Have library provide information on local hiking, biking, and walking routes.
 - c. Have library incorporate healthy lifestyles in its special displays – organic gardening, healthy cooking, fitness books .
8. Engage Public Safety personnel in developing programs that will address concerns about safety as a barrier to residents fully utilizing public resources that contribute to an active and healthy community.
9. Market Winthrop as a community where healthy choices are supported. Work with schools and other local organizations to promote healthy choices for all ages. Provide information about healthy things to do at the town hall and library. Support community programs that encourage healthy activities such as a “community day of walking” or a “Park and Walk” day.