



Physical Activity and Community Design

By Leslie Robbins and Larry Morandi

State and local government collaboration in designing communities can improve public health by increasing opportunities for more active lifestyles. Regular physical activity lowers the risk of certain health conditions—such as cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis, non-insulin dependent diabetes, some cancers, hypertension and arthritis—that can result in permanent disability, reduced quality of life and premature death. Physical activity can also enhance the business community by improving productivity, reducing absenteeism and lowering medical costs.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends at least 30 minutes of moderate activity most days of the week, and the National Association for Sport and Physical Education recently increased its physical activity recommendation for children to 60 minutes per day. Moderate activity can include team sports, tennis, swimming, and walking and biking to and from work or school.

Costs of Physical Inactivity. The overall cost of physical inactivity is high, with CDC estimates suggesting that direct medical expenditures are \$330 less per year for physically active people. A 2003 report commissioned by the Michigan Governor's Council on Physical Fitness, Health and Sports found that a lack of adequate physical activity among 55 percent of the state's adults cost nearly \$8.9 billion in medical care, workers' compensation and lost productivity in 2002. This translates into average costs per adult of \$1,175 (based on an adult population of 7.6 million).

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State Action

State and local governments can help by incorporating things that encourage walking and biking into community design. An active community features a pedestrian focus and provides opportunities for people of all ages and abilities to engage in *routine* daily physical activity. *Routine* is the key—smart land use and transportation decisions can encourage physical activity as part of the community's fabric. Policies that support active living include mixed-use development, various kinds of transportation, and safe routes that allow walking and biking to schools.

State and local governments can design communities that encourage walking and biking.

Costs Associated with Physical Inactivity in Michigan (2002)

	Direct Costs (in millions)	Indirect Costs (in millions)	Sub-Totals (in millions)
Medical Care	\$57.84	\$173.53	\$231.37
Medicaid Portion	17.25	51.75	60.00
Workers' Compensation	7.97	31.89	39.86
Lost Productivity	8,621.85	0	8,621.85
Subtotals	\$8,687.66	\$205.42	\$8,893.08

Source: David Chenoweth, *The Economic Cost of Physical Activity in Michigan*, 2003.

Mixed-Use Development. Policies can provide incentives for local governments to use planning and zoning authorities to place residential, retail, office and school facilities in close proximity to encourage walking and biking as a routine part of community life. Recent legislation includes Florida's law that authorizes local governments to designate rundown areas for redevelopment as mixed-use sites. State incentives for local government designation of redevelopment areas include the authority to issue community development bonds and use tax increment financing. Local incentives for developers include waiver of fees and local sales taxes, expedited permitting and lower impact fees for development that encourages public transit. Maine has created a Municipal Investment Trust Fund to provide loans to municipalities that undertake comprehensive downtown revitalization. Eligible downtown improvements include sidewalks and curb upgrades, all designed to enhance walking and biking opportunities.

Florida's law authorizes local governments to designate rundown areas for redevelopment as mixed-use sites.

Multi-Modal Transportation. These transportation options (public transit, walking and biking) have a greater chance of success in mixed-use developments. Maryland's legislation requires the needs of bicycle riders and pedestrians to be considered in all phases of transportation planning, including highway design and improvement of public transit facilities. Washington requires the state multi-modal transportation plan to integrate bicycle and pedestrian pathways with other transportation options; coordinate state, regional and local government efforts to provide facilities; and assess the role of walking and biking in reducing traffic congestion.

Maryland requires the needs of bicyclists and pedestrians to be considered in transportation planning

Safe Routes to Schools. These plans usually authorize a state agency to administer a competitive, statewide grant program to fund local bicycle and pedestrian safety projects. Grant recipients must determine safety hazards and identify current and potential walking and biking routes for youth. Applications are rated on their potential for reducing child injuries and fatalities and encouraging more walking and bicycling among students. California, Delaware, Florida, New Mexico and Texas have passed legislation setting up safe routes to school programs.

State legislatures can provide incentives for local governments to incorporate walking and biking opportunities in community design. The effects of these policies may not be direct and immediate, but they can result in long-term public health benefits if state and local governments invest in the infrastructure and capital facilities necessary to encourage walking and biking.

Selected References

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