



## HEALTHY PLACES: HOW DESIGNING FOR HEALTH & WELLBEING *Supports Community Prosperity*

One of the signs of a successful place is the presence of people: people strolling, visiting, playing, biking, eating or just hanging out. Designing places where people can be active and connect with others is not only good for people—it's good for business.



Sunday Streets Missoula, Mont., encourages all ages and abilities to be active, support local businesses and imagine a more livable community. Photo: Cathy Costakis



By Cathy Costakis & Tash Wisemiller

**Over the past 15 years there has been increased interest in the connection between health and place. As local governments and downtown districts look for ways to improve the wellbeing of residents and the vitality of communities, it's essential to take a closer look at this connection and explore the wide range of design elements and tools available that will lead to more active, accessible and connected Main Streets.**

#### BACKGROUND

Despite spending nearly three trillion dollars a year on health care—more than any other developed country—Americans have poorer health outcomes, including shorter life expectancy and greater prevalence of chronic conditions. Two out of three adults in the United States are overweight or obese, and obesity has more than doubled in children and quadrupled in adolescents in the past 30 years.

Nearly three-quarters of our health care expenditures are due to “lifestyle diseases” caused mainly by inactivity, poor diet and tobacco use. Mental health, disability, an aging population and social isolation are also escalating public health concerns.

At this point you might be asking yourself, “Isn’t personal health up to the individual and their doctor? What does this have to do with Main Streets?” Certainly the individual has a responsibility for their own health, and doctors play an important role. However, health is influenced by a variety of factors, not least of which is our environment. In fact, the professions of public health, planning, public works, social work and architecture emerged at the turn of the 19th century to solve the problems of unhealthy living conditions in our cities and the resultant widespread outbreak of infectious disease.

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#### HEALTH AND HEALTHY PLACES

According to the World Health Organization, health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of infirmity. Healthy places are those designed and built to improve the quality of life for all people who live, work, worship, learn, and play within their borders—where every person is free to make choices amid a variety of healthy, available, accessible, and affordable options.

[www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/about](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/about)

Today’s “outbreak” is chronic disease such as heart disease, cancer, diabetes and depression. It is becoming well-understood that zip code may be a stronger predictor of a person’s health than their genetic code. Healthy community design can improve people’s ability to be active, reduce injuries, increase access to healthy foods, and improve social connectedness.

## INGREDIENTS OF HEALTHY PLACES

What is the recipe for building places that support health and well-being, and how can designing for health contribute to prosperous Main Street communities?

### Activity Promoting Places

Jeff Speck argues in his book *Walkable City: How Downtown Can Save America* that walkability is the organizing principle for successful downtowns. *“The pedestrian is an extremely fragile species, the canary in the coal mine of urban livability. Under the right conditions, this creature thrives and multiplies. But creating those conditions requires attention to a broad range of criteria, some more easily satisfied than others.”*

Being physically active is one of the most important things a person can do to improve health and well-being. For adults, as little as three 10 minute brisk walks, five days a week, can be enough to reduce the risk for developing a life-altering chronic condition such as diabetes. Children need 60 minutes a day of activity

to support health. Unfortunately, only about half of U.S. adults and about a quarter of high school students get enough activity to meet the recommended guidelines. This is why the Surgeon General of the United States recently issued a *Call to Action to Promote Walking and Walkable Communities*.

So what makes a place walkable? As it turns out, just providing an accessible sidewalk—although a good start—may not be enough.

A complex interplay of design elements are necessary to optimize and encourage walking—and details matter. People need to feel safe, welcomed and comfortable in their walkable environment, and destinations need to be convenient and pathways connected. We have engineered physical activity out of our lives and we need to design it back in to encourage the “fragile species” back onto our streets and sidewalks and into our downtowns.

In *Pedestrian-and Transit-Oriented Design*, a highly recommended book by Reid Ewing and Keith Bartholomew, these research-based design elements are described in detail. Below are a few to whet your appetite.

**Imageability** “the quality of a place that makes it distinct, recognizable and memorable.” This is what provides a “sense of place” and distinguishes historic downtowns with landmark buildings and place-based architecture from “anywhere USA” strip and big-box development.

**Enclosure** “the degree to which streets and other public spaces are visually defined by buildings, walls, trees, and other vertical elements.” Ewing talks about the importance of attaining a “room-like quality” with buildings, trees and other vertical elements providing the “walls.” Breaks in the continuity of the street wall,



Top: A streetscape project in downtown Great Falls, Mont., included several tree plantings and bike parking among other things.

Bottom: In stark contrast, is a section of the same street just a few blocks away.

Photo: Cathy Costakis

by surface parking lots, large building set-backs, vacant lots and other “uses that do not generate human activity and presence are all considered dead spaces.” Dead spaces interrupt a pedestrian’s level of interest in the environment and makes a walk seem longer.

**Human Scale** “refers to a size, texture, and articulation of physical elements that match the size and proportions of humans and, equally important, correspond to the speed at which humans walk.” People need to feel comfortable walking and that comes when the space is designed to their scale: pedestrian-oriented signage, narrower streets, lower buildings with interesting façades; street furniture and intimate public plazas are all ways to create more comfort and interest for the pedestrian.

**Transparency** “refers to the degree to which people can see or perceive what lies beyond the edge of the street or other public space.” Being able to see or perceive “human activity” is especially important. People are social animals and they like being around other people or at least having the perception that other people are near. This can be achieved by having lots of windows that allow you to see what is going on within buildings, or by bringing the indoors out to the street through merchandise displays and outdoor seating. Blank walls, reflective or opaque glass and closed blinds are not only uninteresting to walk by but they can also give the pedestrian an unsafe feeling—the perception that there are no “eyes on the street.”



Example of “transparency” in downtown Missoula.

Photo: Cathy Costakis

**Complexity** “refers to the visual richness of a place.” Interesting and diverse architecture, street furniture, landscape elements, public art, even human activity, all add to the complexity of a place. Again, this keeps the interest of the pedestrian and they are apt to walk longer distances and stay engaged in the place. From a public health perspective, that means they get more physical activity; from an economic perspective, they stay longer and might spend more money.

## Checklist

### Essential Features to Attract Pedestrians

Medium-to-high densities	Continuous sidewalks appropriately scaled
Fine-grained mix of land uses	Safe crossings
Short- to medium-length blocks	Appropriate buffering from traffic
Transit routes every half mile	Street-oriented buildings or closer
Two- to four-lane streets (with rare exceptions)	Comfortable and safe places to wait

Source: Pedestrian-and Transit-Oriented Design

Giant Springs State Park.

Photo: Donnie Sexton



Ewing and Bartholomew include a checklist of essential, highly desirable, and worthwhile but not essential features necessary to attract pedestrians. (See sidebar.) Along with the design elements above, all are important ingredients to entice people to walk.

A strategy worth highlighting here is one that communities all over the country are using to make downtowns safer and more activity-friendly. Some people refer to it as “right-sizing” the road and others refer to it as a “road diet.” Whatever you call it, it is an important way of improving safety for all road users—pedestrians, bicyclists and motorists—and making walking and bicycling more pleasant and convenient. Reducing a four-lane street to two lanes in each direction and a center turn lane can reduce rear-end and sideswipe crashes, allow space for

bicycle facilities, pedestrian bulb-outs and refuge islands while still providing throughput for vehicles.

### Healthy Food Access

Downtowns have a role in supporting a healthy food environment. Many communities are bringing farmers’ markets downtown and this supports a vibrant street life while also improving access to fresh, healthy local foods. To support low-income residents, many farmers’ markets are accepting SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program formerly known as food stamps) and many states such as Montana have Double SNAP Dollars to increase the amount of fresh local food low-income families can purchase with SNAP benefits. This not only benefits the buyer but also the local farmer who grows the food.

Community gardens can be a healthy alternative to dead spaces created by vacant lots. They not only provide healthy food but also a place for people to socialize and provide “eyes on the street.”

Another important contribution to healthy food downtown is supporting healthy food retail and downtown grocery stores or healthy food markets. A great example is in a Certified Main Street community in Montana, Uptown Butte, where the rehab of an historic building added a much needed grocery store to their downtown district along with additional housing on the upper floors—creating a healthy and walkable destination to their downtown. There are resources available for retailers to increase sales and profitability of healthy foods and to find public financing for healthy retail projects.

### Social Connectedness

An entire article could be written about the health benefits, both physical and mental, of social connectedness and the resultant benefits to communities. In a study, called *Soul of the Community*, conducted by Gallup in partnership with the Knight Foundation, the number one driver of resident attachment to communities which then predicted a community’s economic growth and well-being was “social offerings.” They defined social offerings as “the social infrastructure that allows residents to enjoy their community together. It



Downtown Great Falls Farmers Market

Photo: Donnie Sexton

Hennessy Market, a full-service grocery store in a historic rehab project, in Uptown Butte.

Photo: Cathy Costakis



comprises vibrant nightlife, good places to meet people and residents caring for one another.”

Communities are using a number of different strategies to increase social life. Placemaking, although not a new concept, has been advanced over the past 40 years by the Project for Public Spaces and others who see the benefit in strengthening the connection between people and place. Opportunities abound to take back our streets and public spaces for the benefit of people and at the same time increase health and community vitality.

An example of creating more social space is the development of “parklets”—public seating platforms that convert curbside parking spaces into vibrant community spaces. The Main Street community of Anaconda, Montana, is currently designing a seasonal parklet—one that can be removed in the winter—for their downtown district after a successful demonstration project convinced community leaders of its value.



Anaconda's demonstration parklet outside a walk-up ice-cream window.

Photo: Cathy Costakis

### Partner, Prepare, Progress

Creating more walkable and healthy communities does not happen by chance, it is made possible through strong partnerships, good policy and planning and on the ground projects. A national non-profit, Active Living By Design (ALBD), works to create healthier places in a variety of contexts across the country. Through years of learning about the community change process they developed the Community Action Model and 3P Action Steps to better illustrate the pathways that lead to success in designing and building healthier places.

**What encourages or discourages positive interactions between people in a specific community?**

**Questions communities could ask:**

**What events, community gathering places, and programs are available to residents? Are they equally accessible, welcoming, and appealing to all residents?**

**Do crime or safety concerns deter residents from spending time outdoors, using parks, or participating in community programs? If so, how can these problems be addressed?**

**In our community, who tends to be isolated? What changes can be made to ensure all residents are welcome to participate in the community?**

*Adapted from Social Connectedness and Health, Wilber Research 2012*

Strong **partnerships** and an informed and engaged community is the first step. Health partners such as public health and health care professionals are now frequent and important collaborators in community development work. In Montana we bring state and local leaders together to learn from each other and national experts through the Building Active Communities Initiative (BACI). There are also numerous local coalitions focused on multi-sector collaboration to improve health and community well-being.

The Montana Departments of Transportation, Commerce, Health and State Parks and Bike Walk Montana have formed the Montana Walkability Collaborative to provide technical assistance, training and resources to Montana communities in order to build local capacity to create or enhance more active environments. BACI Action Institutes are held each year and multi-sector leadership teams attend from across the state.

ALBD's next Action Step is **preparation**, the *“ongoing and deliberate process of collecting relevant assessment data to inform program planning, prioritizing, and specifying action steps, identifying measures of success, providing appropriate training for partners, and pursuing financial and in-kind resources to build capacity.”*

The final step is about taking action and making **progress** implementing the context-appropriate strategies that have been identified through the collaborative planning process. These strategies can include policy change, programs, promotion, projects and overall systems change—changing the way things work so that the default path creates healthier places by design.

### Health Equity

Making sure improvements to community design improve the health of and include everyone—not just the few—is an important public health priority.

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“Equity in health implies that ideally everyone should have a fair opportunity to attain their full health potential and, more pragmatically, that no one should be disadvantaged from achieving this potential, if it can be avoided.”

### Margaret Whitehead

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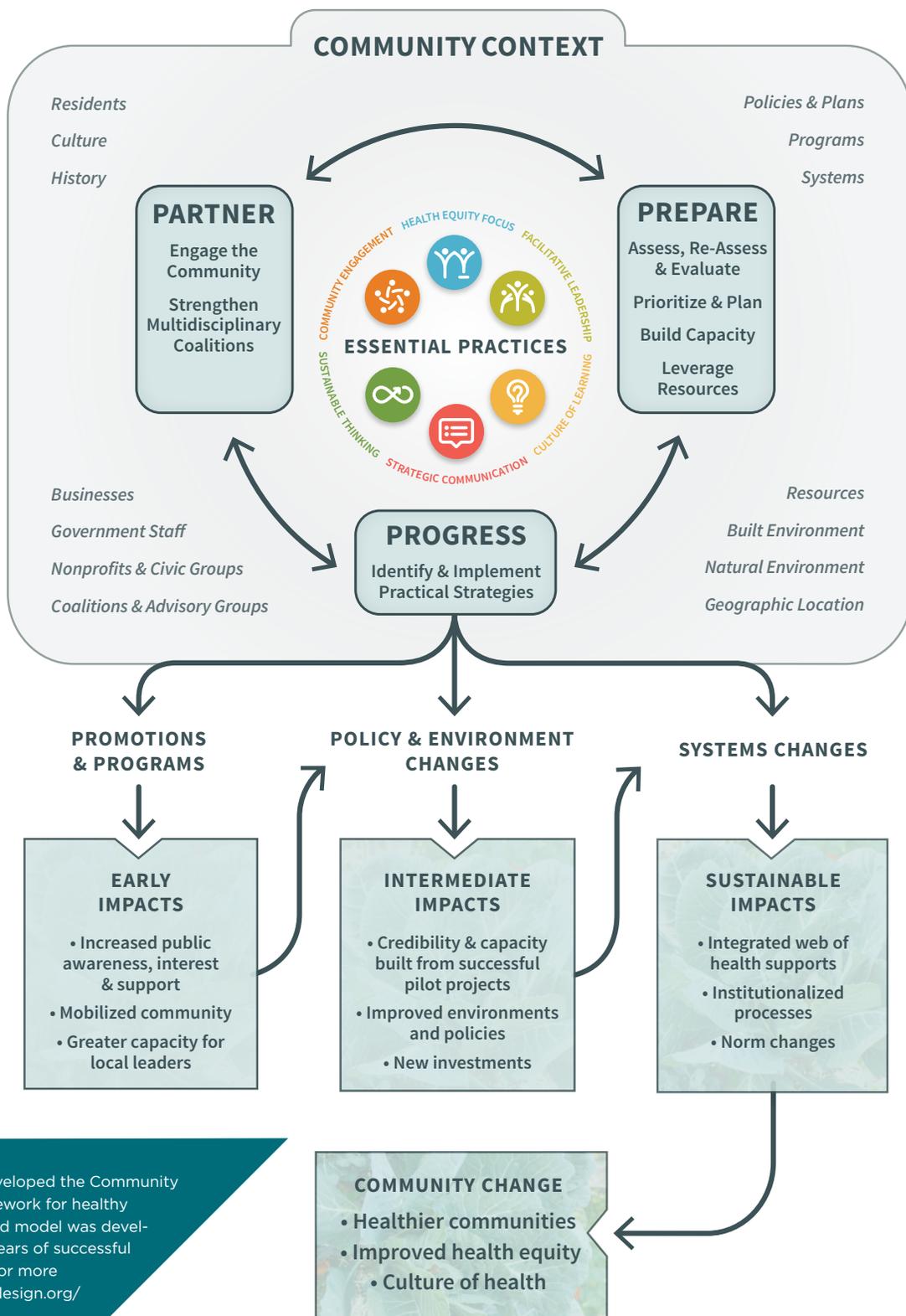
We should strive to make quality housing accessible and affordable and located within a safe, walkable, bikeable or transit accessible distance to jobs and services. Providing affordable and accessible transportation and housing options can not only increase physical activity for people of all abilities

but is an important strategy to save household income for other important expenditures such as healthy food, healthcare services and daily needs. When revitalizing downtowns it is important to consider the needs of all people—regardless of age, income, race or ability. Improving conditions for health and well-being can sometimes lead to unintended consequences, including gentrification, which can cause displacement and adverse health outcomes of current residents.

### WORKING TOGETHER TO IMPROVE HEALTH

Historically, downtown districts were walkable, bikeable, accessible and vibrant—a product of necessity in a world before the automobile. Over the past century cultural shifts and technology have resulted in Main Street becoming an avenue for the car, less for the human—a shift that directly correlates with decreased health and wellness. As we strive to reintroduce design decisions and public policy that reinforce social connectivity, active lifestyles and more vibrant economies, our Main Streets are at the forefront of these changes.

The Montana Main Street Program, dedicated to bettering the economic, historic, and cultural vitality of Montana downtowns, has harnessed significant local enthusiasm to effectively implement a broader vision of healthy downtown dis-



Active Living By Design first developed the Community Action Model in 2003 as a framework for healthy community change. This updated model was developed from more than a dozen years of successful community change initiatives. For more information, visit [activelivingbydesign.org/about/community-action-model](http://activelivingbydesign.org/about/community-action-model).

### Community Action Model

This model is an evidence-informed framework for creating healthier communities through comprehensive and integrated strategies. It serves as the basis for Active Living By Design's work with communities and funders and can be useful to community coalitions and local leaders seeking a collaborative approach to creating healthier places and to funders seeking tested strategies for local investments. For more information, visit [activelivingbydesign.org](http://activelivingbydesign.org).

tricts that contribute to Montana's unique sense of place. Montana Main Street communities of all population sizes have actively prioritized the promotion of healthy communities through good planning, design, and placemaking. The collaborative forum of the Building Active Communities Initiative (BACI) has allowed local teams of diverse, yet interconnected, professions to confer best practices, share innovative ideas, and identify a local vision that integrates public health and community building.

Main Street communities participating in the Building Active Communities Initiative develop action plans that illustrate the interconnectivity between public health, spaces, and infrastructure. In the city of Great Falls, the Downtown Development Partnership has emerged as a major force in developing a downtown vision and revitalization strategy. The organization, in partnership with the City, maintains designated membership with the National Main Street Center, and contributed to completing a downtown master plan in 2012 that emphasized the importance of promoting a walkable and healthy community.

During the spring BACI workshop, community teams worked with Mike Lydon, author of *Tactical Urbanism: Short-term Action for Long-term Change*, on a tactical

urbanism project to assess the walkability of the Great Falls downtown district and to create a temporary crosswalk within a busy intersection experiencing increased pedestrian traffic as a result of a recently rehabilitated historic boutique hotel and Irish pub.

In addition, the city expanded greenspace along the Missouri River and expanded its River's Edge Trail system to connect the historic downtown district to five miles of riverfront including Black Eagle Falls, Giant Springs State Park, and the Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center.

The downtown district has developed public spaces, grown its farmers market, spurred a public art movement, generated a significant volunteer base, and implemented a façade design program that has complemented numerous historic preservation and mixed-use rehabilitation projects. The community is moving forward with a wayfinding plan and intends to work with local restaurants to create downtown parklets to illustrate the importance of enabling outdoor dining and creating inviting public spaces.

## CONCLUSION

The scale and complexity of the public health crisis in this country is daunting. The health sector cannot solve these issues alone because much of what affects our ability to live healthy lives lies outside the control of health professionals. Working collaboratively across disciplines is our best hope for success. There are bright spots in Main Street communities all over the



Tactical Urbanism crosswalk project in Great Falls, Mont.

Photos: Allison Mouch



country where health and community development are working together to create healthier places where everyone can be active, enjoy healthy food, be connected to their neighbors and thrive.

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“The BACI initiative is a critical part of implementing our city’s Downtown Master Plan. BACI has energized several talented young professionals, including one with disabilities, to get involved and develop options for everyone in our community.” **Bill Bronson, Great Falls City Commissioner**

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#### Additional Resources:

##### Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Healthy Places Website:

A great resource for a variety of topics related to health and community design including the Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Promote Walking and Walkable Communities, healthy planning tools, healthy food access and Health Impact Assessment (HIA).  
Website: [cdc.gov/healthyplaces](http://cdc.gov/healthyplaces)

**Built Environment Assessment Tool:** Measures the core features and qualities of the built environment that affect health, especially walking, biking, and other types of physical activity as well as the food environment. Website: [cdc.gov/nccdphp/dch/built-environment-assessment](http://cdc.gov/nccdphp/dch/built-environment-assessment)

**Commit to Inclusion:** A global campaign to end the exclusion of people with disability from physical activity and all associated areas. Website: [committoinclusion.org](http://committoinclusion.org)

**Community Health Inclusion Index (CHII):** A set of survey tools used to help communities gather information on the extent to which there are health living resources that are inclusive of all members of the community, including persons with disabilities. Website: [nchpad.org/1273/6358/Community-Health-Inclusion-Index](http://nchpad.org/1273/6358/Community-Health-Inclusion-Index)

**ChangeLab Solutions:** Pioneering a new approach to public health advocacy by fostering collaboration between public health officials dedicated to chronic disease prevention and local planning officials. Website: [changelabsolutions.org/healthy-planning](http://changelabsolutions.org/healthy-planning)

**Build Healthy Places Network:** Connects health and community development leaders and provides tools for better collaborative work. Website: [buildhealthyplaces.org](http://buildhealthyplaces.org)

**Healthy Food Access Portal:** Resources for food retail operators, community members, and others are available to support new healthy food retail projects nationwide, including planning and financial resources. Website: [healthyfoodaccess.org/retail-strategies](http://healthyfoodaccess.org/retail-strategies)

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