The Connection between Health and Municipal and Regional Policy

Good health is not just the result of good medical care but the result of what we do as a society to create conditions in which people can be healthy. Public policy can be one of the most effective approaches to protecting and improving the health of the population as a whole.

The Cost to our Towns of Poor Health: Obesity is linked to chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol, heart disease and stroke. People with obesity are likely to see a 50% increase in lifetime medical care costs associated with these diseases.[1] Obesity not only increases the costs of health care, but it also imposes a burden on our communities. It is associated with lower productivity and absenteeism in the workplace, decreased academic success, lower life expectancy, and increased transportation cost, all of which impact the economic viability of a community. Unhealthy people need more from their government throughout their lives: more help in school, more access to school nurses, more sick time off from work in town, more use of ambulances, less ability to pay taxes, earlier entry into nursing homes, and more. Health care costs on a state level also reduce state funds for communities, roads, bridges, and schools.

What can our region do to improve health? Franklin County is part of the *Mass in Motion* Municipal Wellness and Leadership Program, a statewide movement to prevent obesity and chronic disease in Massachusetts by increasing opportunities for healthy eating and active living in the places we live, learn, work, and play. The public structures we create and support as towns and as a region, such as transportation systems that support walking and biking, and access to healthy affordable food, determine how strong and healthy our citizens can be. Improving these structures leads to overall improvement in the health of all residents.

What can an individual town do to improve health? Studies show that being healthy as adults is largely determined by the communities we live in as children. Communities differ in the quality of their food and fitness environments and that has a big effect on the children who grow up there. Our local school districts have made tremendous efforts to improve nutrition and increase physical activity, as evidenced by the *Healthy Bodies, Active Minds* report. There is room to do more. Towns can support and complement the schools' efforts by checking in with the district to see what they are doing to improve health and publicly support these initiatives, and by ensuring your town has up to date:

- Community Master Plans and Open Space and Recreation Plans
- Regulations for zoning and Special Permit Review so that plans for any new development consider lighting, walkability, sidewalks, crosswalks and road speeds
- Regulations for road design to make all roads accessible to pedestrians and cyclists.
- Local health regulations that limit exposure to second hand smoke as well as youth access to tobacco products
- Local health regulations regarding alcohol advertising
- Smoke-free multi-unit housing policies

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[1] http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3047996/

Healthy Community Design Checklist

Health starts where you live, learn, work, and play

- ❑ My town provides options to help me be physically active.
  - ○ Sidewalks
  - ○ Bike Lanes
  - ○ Parks/trails/openspaces
  - ○ Daily activities within walking and biking distance

- ❑ In my town I can find healthier and more affordable food choices.
  - ○ Community gardens on town-owned land with water access
  - ○ Farmers markets, seasonal farm stands or other places to buy fresh fruits and vegetables, that accept SNAP and WIC
  - ○ Zoning regulations that limit fast food outlets and convenience stores

- ❑ I can get where I need to go in my community without a car.
  - ○ Public transportation is available to get to workplaces, healthcare, food shopping and educational/training opportunities
  - ○ Ability to bike and walk to daily activities
  - ○ Bike racks on buses and in the community

- ❑ I feel safe in my community.
  - ○ Adequate street lighting so people can walk in the dark
  - ○ Well-marked crosswalks and bike lanes
  - ○ Reduced vehicle speed on residential streets
  - ○ Opportunities to get more "eyes on the street" day and night

- ❑ In my town I have chances to get to know my neighbors.
  - ○ Pleasant public spaces to gather
  - ○ Inclusive community events

- ❑ My community is a good place for all people to live regardless of age, abilities, or income.
  - ○ Housing available for all income levels and types of households
  - ○ Easy for people to get around regardless of abilities
  - ○ Opportunities for employment
  - ○ Opportunities for education

- ❑ My community has a clean environment.
  - ○ Reduce air and noise pollution
  - ○ Private well regulations requiring testing for pollutants
  - ○ Old industrial sites have been cleaned up