

A Holistic Approach to Community Connectivity

Written by Cindy Heath is the Executive Director of GP RED



The positive health impacts of a built environment designed for active transportation and recreation have been well documented. However, designing intentionally for connectivity using human-powered travel to important community destinations is often overlooked by public health practitioners, transportation designers, recreation and park professionals, and community planners.

Why? One theory - with the overwhelming number of assessment tools, impact measurement systems, research initiatives, programs, and design strategies, architects of change have become specialists, focusing on implementing the latest tools and measurements designed by researchers for their particular niche. We have been creating pockets of brilliant, though disconnected, advancements in this nascent movement known as 'active transportation'. The time has come to begin thinking and planning intentionally and holistically about connectivity on a broader scale. Connecting community leaders to each other to effect policy changes, connecting active transportation systems to desired community destinations, and most important, connecting people to their choices for safe, convenient, and active transportation.

Where does an advocate for active transportation and community connectivity begin? How does one sort through the maze of research, assessment tools, and case studies for the best practices? What role can parks and recreation professionals play in effecting change? Are we thought leaders, supporting the emergence of a new approach, mediators between old and new, or outspoken champions, shedding light on why change is good and necessary?

Important changes often happen with a lot of patience, hard work, and one meaningful conversation at a time. A shift in how we think design and plan communities can occur gradually and with intention, or sadly, very quickly in response to a wake-up call like a pedestrian or bicyclist injury or death caused by unsafe travel conditions human powered travel modes.

In New Hampshire, this shift is happening. Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) is a partner and fiscal sponsor for the New Hampshire Bicycle and Pedestrian Grant Program, which awarded a total of \$100,000 to six grantees to support bicycle and pedestrian transportation projects in New Hampshire. Grants ranging between \$5,000 and \$25,000 were awarded to the Town of Belmont, Central New Hampshire Bicycling Coalition, City of Lebanon, Town of Littleton, City of Manchester, and YMCA of Greater Nashua.



An inclusive, connected system of transportation design requires innovation in public policy, a commitment to social equity, an opportunistic philosophy, substantial long term investment, and energized leaders. Fortunately, numerous community success stories, engineering strategies, and time tested best practices exist in the field of active transportation with a focus on community connectivity. These strategies can be organized into three broad categories:

1. **Policies:** Connecting community leadership to effect policy change
2. **Infrastructure:** Connecting community destinations using active transportation designs
3. **Engagement:** Connecting people to the active transportation system and engaging them in the planning process

The key to implementing these vitally important concepts is to embrace the overarching goal of making the choice for active transportation easy and safe.

Specific Strategies to Advance a Holistic Approach to Community Connectivity

Policies

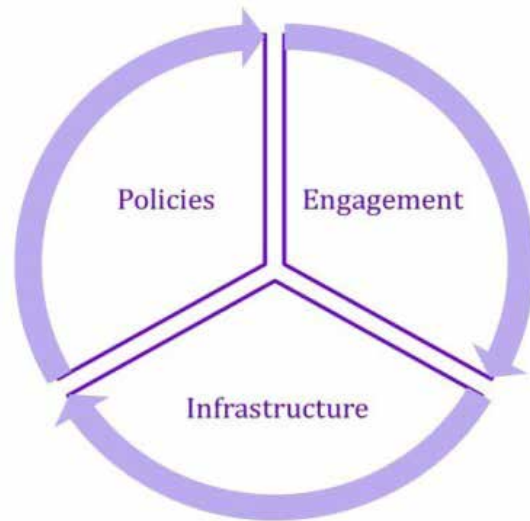
- Adopt Complete Streets policies at the local and state level
- Conduct bicycle and walk friendly audits for businesses, communities, academic institutions
- Incorporate Safe Routes To School, Safe Routes to Play, and Complete Streets language in master plans at the local, regional, and state level
- Install bicycle/pedestrian specific signage and road marking

Infrastructure

- Incorporate traffic calming measures, road diets, bicycle boulevards, landscaping
- Separate bicycle lanes and cycle tracks from vehicles on roadways
- Incorporate amenities – shade trees, benches, water fountains, signage
- Utilize GIS mapping to identify gaps in connectivity and resident proximity to trails, greenways, and active transportation systems

Community Engagement

- Conduct public education campaigns
- Work toward Bicycle & Walk Friendly Community designations
- Consider street closings for active transportation friendly events



In conclusion, it's fair to say that we know how to approach healthy community design holistically, and many communities are adopting the practice after years of using a sector silo realize that a focus on active transportation and connectivity is an evolved goal, which integrates transportation, public health, parks and recreation, and planning/design strategies. Community connectivity occurs when visionary professionals and engaged citizenry think beyond their boundaries and pool resources to achieve success.

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