Why is Health Essential to a Sustainable Community?

The concept of a healthy community is broad. It can include public safety, health and welfare aspects such as education and training, police, fire and medical emergency services, drinking water and sanitary sewers, food safety, libraries, parks, and playgrounds. This also encompasses a strong sense of community among citizens shown by their willingness to support public events through attendance and volunteerism. "Quality of life" often is used as the catch-all phrase.

Defined more narrowly, good physical and mental health are basic to the functioning of individuals and, collectively, the community. Understanding and practicing a healthy lifestyle is necessary to achieving a person’s full potential. Most importantly this includes choices that can prevent health problems such as a good diet, regular exercise, avoiding substance abuse, obtaining immunizations and maintaining family integrity necessary for healthy development of children. In addition, the local, county and state governments have roles to play by ensuring clean air and water, affordable access to health care and quality education.

Clearly the quality of life in a community will influence the willingness of people to move to the area and remain there. The same is true of job producing businesses. This attractiveness is essential to a healthy tax base. In addition to these economic benefits, a healthy community will protect its natural and man-made assets such as streams, viewsheds, open spaces and civic and historic places. These attributes are favored by young professionals and others who are attracted to opportunities for an active lifestyle.

A healthy community should also have a low crime rate and minimal costs for supporting the justice system.

SUSTAINABILITY CASE STUDY: Attributes of a Healthy Community

The concept of a healthy community is broad and goes to the very reason for the existence of government – to protect the public health, safety and welfare. While this case study does not identify a specific municipality, a number of attributes have been identified which would characterize a model healthy community. A key lesson is that creating a healthy community is part of an ongoing process:

- A written policy adopted by the governing body specifically addressing the need for the municipality to be proactive in this area. A vital element is involvement of all sectors of the community in decisions which affect them. Another element is recognition of generational equity; how will future generations be affected by our actions today?
- A vision of a healthy community and a comprehensive plan – preferably multi-municipal – that has an element that addresses social opportunities in addition to the physical elements of most traditional comprehensive plans. A primary part of this element is to reduce disparities in education, health, and economic opportunities.
- Zoning and subdivision/land development ordinances that encourage the built environment to be designed to promote an active lifestyle. Examples include an interconnected network of sidewalks and trails throughout the municipality that access desired destinations such as schools, shopping, churches, and offices.
- Access to health care facilities
- Policies and ordinances that encourage dense mixed-use development in the core and discourages in the open spaces beyond the core. This will promote walking and bicycling and discourage auto dependency.
- Use of the land use management program to protect the water supply and manage stormwater in a way that it is not a threat to life and property. This program should also protect environmentally sensitive areas such as steep slopes, ridgelines, wetlands, waterways, and their buffers.
- Facilities and programs that encourage activity for people of all ages such as inter-neighborhood athletic tournaments, youth sports, and festivals for the elderly.
- A public-private partnership that provides wellness information to all citizens.
- An aggressive program that ensures access to all buildings by the disabled.
- A home visitation and meals on wheels program in support of the elderly and persons with disabilities.
- Cooperation with schools and other organizations to share facilities and programs.
- Public celebrations of school students and adults who excel in non-athletic as well as athletic pursuits.
- Support of public education sufficient to ensure that every child receives full opportunity to learn and excel.
- Support for local businesses and those that pay a family-sustaining wage with adequate benefits.
- Housing within financial reach of all citizens and workers in the community.
- Provision of fire, police and emergency management services consistent with professional standards.
Healthy Communities

Actions for Implementation

• Elected and appointed officials should educate themselves about the benefit of a healthy community and the actions that can lead to this outcome.

• Adoption of a policy statement committing the municipality to sustainability. The policy statement should be used to guide the preparation of the comprehensive plan.

• A comprehensive plan – preferably a multi-municipal plan – is an initial action for a municipality that is committed to managing its future. The process of involving all segments of the community in a visioning process and the resulting plan dealing with all aspects of a community’s life can provide the guidelines for public and private action into the future. As the name implies, the comprehensive plan provides the opportunity to view the community in parts and as a whole all at one time. Thus inter-relationships can be identified and evaluated to ensure they fit into the overall desires for the community’s future. Several of the elements of a comprehensive plan prescribed by the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code directly affect community health. These include community facilities and utilities, transportation, housing and protection of the water supply. The comprehensive plan, as its name implies, should assess and address every aspect of a community’s life. This becomes more important as statistics show that obesity, especially among children, is a growing national problem and that lower-income individuals have poorer health, partly due to a lack of physical activity and access to nutritious foods.

• The plan is a guide, not law. Therefore, it is implemented through ordinances such as zoning and subdivision/land development, plus the operating and capital budgets. These official actions should be consistent with the plan.

• Encourage non-profit sector initiatives such as affordable housing by issuing support letters and lobbying county and state officials.

• Focus transfer funds such as Community Development Block Grants on goods and services that promote healthy communities.

• Attract employers and support existing locally owned businesses that offer family-sustaining wages and keep profits in the community.

• Although management of public schools is in the hands of an elected school board, municipal officials can offer support for their efforts and examine opportunities for cooperation such as joint use of a swimming pool or ballfields.

• Partner with schools to promote the walking school bus concept, in which a designated adult walks door-to-door and supervises children as they walk to school.

• Partner with health insurers and providers to sponsor community outreach that promotes an active and healthy lifestyle. An example is a festival emphasizing locally produced foods and outdoor recreation. Another example is to provide health education outreach where people congregate such as barber and beauty shops or churches.

• Ensure that sidewalks and street trees are provided throughout the municipality and are kept in good repair to encourage walking.

• Provide bulb-outs at intersections that will narrow the street at the point of crossing and also serve as a traffic calming tool.

• Encourage a high quality pedestrian experience in the retail area with benches, planters, outdoor eating, etc.

• Partner with the state and others to clean contaminated sites.

• Drain any areas of standing water to prevent mosquito breeding.

• Partner with the Penn State Extension Service to educate farmers and gardeners about integrated pest management vs. the use of toxic pesticides.
How can this Essential be Measured?

The adequacy of public goods and services can be measured against national standards that have been adopted by each interested group. An example might be the number of basketball courts for a given number of youth and young adults or the capacity for fire fighting measured by the number of structures and the geographical and topographical characteristics of the community or the proximity of libraries and health care to residential areas. In addition, the accessibility and quality of facilities must be addressed. These standards can be used to guide the preparation of the comprehensive plan outlined below.

The social equity goal of sustainability can be measured by examining whether the design of the community provides equal access by all income and age groups and those with disabilities to opportunities for a healthy lifestyle. For example lower income areas should not be overburdened with fast food restaurants and bars. However, all neighborhoods should have reasonable access to stores selling healthful food.

Other indicators of the community’s commitment to social equity are the percentage of jobs that do not pay a living wage, unemployment rates by race, active job training and enforced goals to ensure that minority and women owned businesses receive a fair share of contracts.

Parks and playgrounds should be within walking distance of all residents. Dense mixed use neighborhoods promote walking and bicycling to access daily needs in contrast to requiring the use of a vehicle to access different activity centers of the community. The pedestrian and cyclist should be favored.

The number of violent and property crimes are common measures of public safety in a community.

The involvement of citizens in public issues, boards, commissions, etc. as well as voting rates can be measures of commitment to the municipality. The number of block party permits can be a measure of neighborhood social cohesion. From the standpoint of an elected official citizen satisfaction can be measured by the ability to get re-elected.

The municipality in cooperation with the faith community and other non-profit organizations can assure affordable, high quality day care for all neighborhoods.

Childhood illness and poverty are another measure of a healthy community. High school graduation rates can be applied to the older youth population.