Where you live can make you fat. That’s an idea that never ceases to surprise people when they first hear it. More specifically, the idea is that the design of your community can either encourage or discourage a healthy lifestyle—from walking to work or a friend’s house, to eating healthy foods or not. A typical response might be, “But it’s a matter of personal choice. After all, don’t you choose whether to exercise or to eat well?”

But research is confirming that there are many ways our communities shape our lives and our health. After all, wide streets with speeding traffic are no invitation to let your child walk to school, while sidewalks in good repair and safe crosswalks might. A regular farmer’s market is an invitation to healthy eating, while endless strips of fast food restaurants are the exact opposite. That’s why an increasing number of health promotion initiatives are not just telling people how to be healthy, such as promoting at least 30 minutes of physical activity every day and eating more fruits and vegetables. Frankly, these are things we generally already know. Instead there is a growing focus on creating healthier communities by design.

A wonderful example of this community-level approach is the Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative. Until recently, many experts have wondered whether a “community design” approach that’s appropriate for big cities and densely populated suburban areas could actually work in smaller communities and rural settings. But the Food and Fitness Initiative, based in Decorah and the surrounding counties of northeastern Iowa, illustrates that there are plenty of health promoting policies and projects that are very well suited to more rural environments.

**FIVE ELEMENTS OF A HEALTHY COMMUNITY**

What constitutes a healthy setting? Consider the typical modern suburb with sprawling housing subdivisions which are separate from strip malls and big box stores, which are separate from office and industrial parks, which are separate from large consolidated school complexes. This “single use zoning” design assures that every trip you take, to shop or school or work, requires jumping in the car; things are just too far apart to walk or ride your bike. Sidewalks are often incomplete or missing entirely, and many destinations are designed for automobiles only. Giant parking lots dominate the retail and business landscape, and crosswalks, bike lanes, and other safety features are a rare afterthought. The notion of a neighborhood or corner store is absent, often even precluded by zoning code.

Compare that to the traditional smaller community in Iowa. Historically the village core often included a compact neighborhood of homes and apartment buildings, churches, schools, the library, post office, and town hall, businesses, and most shopping needs, from groceries to hardware. Even in the smallest towns the main streets exhibit what planners call “mixed use,” with retail stores on the first floor and offices or apartments above in two and three story buildings built right up to the sidewalk, not set behind giant parking lots. Street trees, benches, and on-street parking are common, as are marked crosswalks. These features assure that it’s reasonable to walk or ride a bike between destinations—even if you have to drive into town, you can walk from the bank to the post office to the grocery store. And although schools are being increasingly consolidated, traditionally most towns had at least their own elementary school, often serving up through eighth grade.

It turns out these differences in design really matter. Researchers have identified a number of characteristics that define settings where people are more likely to be physically active and even eat a better diet. We can boil the research down to five broad elements that characterize such healthier communities:

1. **Compact and varied neighborhoods.** What planners call a mix of land uses, this means different types of destinations—where we live, work, shop, play, learn, and pray—are intermingled and close together. To put it simply, it’s a lot easier to walk up a quart of milk if there’s a corner store in the neighborhood.

2. **Good connections.** Quality sidewalks, pathways, bicycle lanes and designated bike routes, safe crossings, and a good network of streets (without lots of dead ends) connect neighborhoods and destinations. After all, you’re
even more likely to walk to that corner store if there’s a decent sidewalk the entire way.

3. **Inviting designs and delineations.** Buildings constructed near the street are inviting to bicyclists and pedestrians, while giant parking lots between the sidewalk and front door is a deterrent. Think Main Street, not shopping malls. Details such as street trees, awnings, benches, bike racks, and drinking fountains are not just aesthetically pleasing; they improve the setting functionally for pedestrians and cyclists.

4. **Safety and access for all.** Curb ramps, countdown timers on pedestrian signals, and safety features such as median islands and roundabouts are examples of the many tools engineers can use to create conditions that encourage more walking and biking by people of all ages and abilities. These are especially valuable to those too young or old to drive a car, as well as poorer residents and those with disabilities.

5. **Keep good food close.** If we know what a healthy community looks like, how do we actually make sure we’re building our towns that way? The good news is that smaller, rural communities are actually closer to a healthy style of design than most larger cities that have suffered the suburban sprawl and downtown demise common across America. But there are a number of things that smaller communities and even rural areas should do to make certain they have the most inviting settings for healthy and active lifestyles.

**TOOLS AND RULES FOR HEALTH IN RURAL AND SMALLER COMMUNITIES.**

If we know what a healthy community looks like, how do we actually make sure we’re building our towns that way? The good news is that smaller, rural communities are actually closer to a healthy style of design than most larger cities that have suffered the suburban sprawl and downtown demise common across America. But there are a number of things that smaller communities and even rural areas should do to make certain they have the most inviting settings for healthy and active lifestyles.

**Protect farmland and open space.** Many people think land use planning means “urban” planning, and that it is only needed in large cities and towns. But America’s biggest health battleground may be in our rural, and especially agricultural, states where every year huge swaths of productive farmland are paved over and developed for housing subdivisions and giant retail development. The most enlightened communities are making forward thinking land use plans and policies that allow retiring farmers to benefit from the value of their land without having to sell it to suburban development, unhealthy development. The first step is creating plans that designate areas that will not be developed but must be retained as open space or farm land. The second is to put in place tools and policies such as agricultural and open space trusts and community supported agricultural cooperatives, tax abatement, and the sale or transfer of development rights to equitably compensate land owners while reducing the amount of automobile-oriented sprawl that occurs.

**Create community gardens on school grounds, in parks, and along trail, planted and maintained by the students.** Some schools have partnered with retirees, service groups, organic farmers and others to guide such efforts. Produce from the gardens can then be sold, donated, or simply eaten in the school lunch program.

**Limit where fast food restaurants can be located.** Communities have successfully restricted fast food establishments, not allowing them to be built within a certain distance of schools (studies have correlated proximity and consumption by students, not surprisingly), and in some cases banning national chains entirely. While a farmers market or Community Supported Agriculture program encourages healthy choices, restricting fast food discourages very unhealthy choices.

**Celebrate and support locally grown food.** Start simply, with a regular local farmers market. If you have enough support (both producers and customers) to hold it multiple days per week in the summer, consider rotating to different neighborhoods or villages to reach more residents. Other ways to make the healthy eating connection:
sidepaths that connected to commercial and retail areas, and public facilities such as parks and government buildings (as you'd find in many of the traditional small towns across Iowa), then those same kids could at least walk to a friend's house. The key is for new residential development to mimic the style of what we know works—more modest sized lots on narrower (and thus slower and safer) streets on a well-connected grid within walking distance of meaningful destinations.

INVEST IN THRIVING DOWNTOWNS AND VILLAGE CENTERS.
When the big boxes come to the area (and know that eventually they will) create incentives, rewards, and even zoning requirements that encourage their construction in or very close to and well connected with the existing downtowns. Although the WalMart retail complex in Decorah, IA is outside of the downtown, it’s only about a mile away and connected by a gorgeous bicycle trail and bridge that links to the Tout Run Trail, meaning that both employees and shoppers have a viable option to walk or bicycle to the store and the parking lot can serve as a trailhead for the trail system. But just as important is to do everything possible to keep exiting town centers as viable and appealing business districts. Specific approaches:

Encourage new development, even national retailers, to build in or as close as possible to existing downtowns and village centers. The WalMart in Rutland, VT took over the former K-Mart location in the downtown rather than a new parcel out on a commercial strip along the state highway, and it has helped maintain the commercial life of the town’s core.

Even if main thoroughfares are state highways, traffic must be “calmed” to a safe speed when passing through town.
Explore traffic calming and safety measures such as signs, paint, bike lanes, median islands, roundabouts, even raised crossings, so that pedestrians, bicyclists, and vehicles can safely co-exist. This is good for safety and for local businesses.

Keep the downtown housing density high.
Support apartments or condominiums above retail uses. The more people who live downtown, the healthier downtowns become. Storefronts in existing buildings and in new construction, matching traditional downtown architectural styles and distances traveled by pedestrians, bicyclists, transit, and motor vehicles. This doesn’t mean we must stripe a bicycle lane on every road. But it does mean we should always ask, “Where can a bicyclist safely ride here?” On a very rural road that will see relatively little bicycle and pedestrian travel, a wide paved shoulder may suffice. In town, bicyclists, pedestrians, or sidewalks are more appropriate, while on primary routes between towns a multi-use path paralleling a high speed roadway may be best. The two key steps to success here are: Engineering and planning officials must create roadway standards that prescribe designs for different settings and conditions that account for all user groups, not just motor vehicles. Once design standards are in place, it’s much easier for planners and elected officials to require that any new development include pedestrian and bicycle facilities. (Examples of policies and guidelines are accessible through the national website.)

CREATE INTRA-AND INTER-TOWN TRAIL NETWORKS.
Here’s where small towns and rural settings can outperform larger cities and towns—it’s often easier to identify potential trail and pathway routes because areas have not yet been overdeveloped. Abandoned rail lines or utility corridors can be ideal, and trails are being placed along some active rail lines trails are being placed at a safe distance parallel to the tracks (see Rails-with-Trails, Lessons Learned in the resource box). But even more important than long distance trails that connect between villages and towns are the small connector trails that make functional links within communities. A study funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation found that the most heavily used portions of several long distance trails featured three attributes:

The trail was well connected with other elements of the transportation system, including sidewalks, bicycle lanes, small neighborhood trails links, and transit stops.

The trail brought users to desirable destinations such as the library and post office, schools, shopping, and parks.

The trail was not designed as an escape route, but rather was integrated into the fabric of the community. So certainly work on the rail trail to connect your town to the next one over, but also look for those informal paths and goat trails that connect a neighborhood to the school grounds, or some senior housing to a shopping area. Those
may be the best places to put your effort into constructing a connector trail that will have people on it before the asphalt is even dry.

**LAUNCH A COMPREHENSIVE SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL PROGRAM.**

The idea of Safe Routes to School (SRTS) is not simply to help those children who live close to school begin walking and bicycling more regularly. It’s to create an environment where all children get more safe opportunities for more routine physical activity. The idea is to use engineering improvements, education and encouragement programs, enhanced enforcement, and ongoing evaluation (the five Es) to make physical improvements (such as building missing sidewalks) as well change policies and practices to support more physically active travel.

In Columbia, MO, for example, the West Boulevard Elementary school recognized one reason even nearby parents weren’t allowing their children to walk to school was the traffic jam of school busses and cars in front of the building created an unsafe and uninviting school. Parents in cars are also beginning to use this remote drop-off site (a church or store parking lot can play the same role), and teachers have reported that they observe kids who’ve even just had that short walk arrive at school calmer and more ready to learn. The effort is also revitalizing an otherwise under-utilized park. And now parents from nearby the school feel safer letting their kids walk and bike to school.

The beauty of small town America is that by its nature it may be the healthiest type of design we’ve ever created. The problem is that in our fast paced, automobile-oriented 20th century we drifted away from many of the things that made such communities great. Neighborhood schools, traditional downtowns, compact walkable neighborhoods, and ample farmland and open space nearby all defined communities where being active was a way of life, not a conscious decision. Now we must embrace the lessons of these historically healthy designs, if not for ourselves, then for the benefit of the next generation.

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**BUT HOW DO WE PAY FOR ALL OF THIS STUFF?**

Don’t let local officials tell you the city or county can’t afford to build sidewalks or trails, or make a pedestrian crossing safer. Many very valuable improvements, such as painting bicycle lanes, don’t require much funding at all. But they do require political will, which you can help build. For costlier projects, here are seven approaches communities large and small are using nationwide. The most successful do not depend on any one resource, but draw on all of those for a comprehensive approach.

1. **ROUTINE ACCOMMODATION.** Make Complete Streets the rule, so that every road project accommodates pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit riders (as well as motor vehicles) on absolutely all new construction and redevelopment. Build such requirements into subdivision regulations, roadway design guidelines, and all development review.

2. **OPPORTUNISTIC IMPROVEMENT.** Build or enhance pedestrian, bicycle, and transit facilities at reduced cost during other construction activities, such as sewers, work on underground or overhead utility corridors, and routine road resurfacing.

3. **MITIGATION AND IMPACT FEES FOR DEVELOPMENT.** Require all developments to study the full transportation impacts of a project. This means not just estimated motor-vehicle traffic counts, but also opportunities for pedestrian, bicycle, and transit travel. Then:

   a. Require the developer to construct non-motorized facilities (e.g. sidewalks bike lanes, trails transit stops) within the project and to nearby, off-site destinations (schools, shopping, etc.) to mitigate those impacts. And/or . . .
   
   b. Charge development impact fees to mitigate the impacts, with the fees legally dedicated to only be used on enhanced pedestrian, bike, and transit capacity.

4. **GRANT PROGRAMS AND TRANSPORTATION FUNDS.** Utilize state and federal resources. E.g.

   a. The Transportation Enhancements (TE) Program.
   
   b. Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality funds
   
   c. Transit Oriented Development grants
   
   d. Safe Routes to School program funds
   
   e. Highway safety funds and the Surface Transportation program
   
   f. Recreational Trail funds; Greenways and Trails Grants.

5. **BETTERMENTS. SPECIAL IMPROVEMENT DISTRICTS. TAX INCREMENT FINANCING.** Charge adjacent property owners or a general neighborhood or business district for construction or improvement of sidewalks, trail, bicycle parking, or other facilities based on the need and increased access and value for those landowners.

6. **SPECIAL FUNDING & RESOURCES.** Foundations, corporate sponsorships, service groups, and adopt-a-trail and “friends” organizations can all provide funding or in-kind support for creation or maintenance of facilities such as trails, parks, and open space.

7. **CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS.** Many cities and towns have a small but regular portion of the budget annually dedicated to sidewalk, pathway, and bike lane construction and maintenance.

These sources can all help in the construction of new facilities, but many communities find their greater concern is funding the long term maintenance costs of, say, a new trail or sidewalk network. Some of the most successful communities use initial funding, private partnerships, “Friends of the Trail” organizations, adopt-a-trail, and other approaches to also create endowment funds and in-kind mechanisms to support the long term maintenance of facilities.