

Planning with a Public Health Focus

CONNECTING THE DOTS IN THE EAST CENTRAL REGION OF WISCONSIN



Trestle Trail

THE ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH WE LIVE IS STRONGLY LINKED to our ability to make healthy lifestyle choices. Across the United States, transportation and public health practitioners are working together to incorporate pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure into roadway projects in an effort to advance health equity through planning.

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—KURT EGGBRECHT, HEALTH OFFICER
FOR THE APPLETON DEPARTMENT
OF HEALTH

To encourage collaboration and assist practitioners in their efforts, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the US Department of Transportation, with support from the American Public Health Association, developed a simple-to-use Transportation and Health Tool. The online tool, launched in 2015, provides state and metropolitan area transportation professionals with easy access to data and strategies to improve public health through transportation planning and policy.

Almost a decade before the launch of the Transportation and Health Tool, though, the East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, along with communities within the region, began connecting the dots between health and transportation. The region features numerous success stories of how public health-planning partnerships have improved the environments where people live, work and play.

MAKING THE CONNECTION

The East Central Region of Wisconsin is made up of 10 counties, eight of which are members of the East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission. Member counties contribute financially to the Commission, allowing it to leverage state and federal funds for regional transportation, economic development and environmental planning.

The East Central Region is made up of rural, suburban and urban communities, with three urbanized areas with populations of 50,000 or greater: Appleton (Fox Cities); Oshkosh; and Fond du Lac. Each of these areas has



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its own metropolitan planning organization, or MPO, to which the Commission provides planning and technical assistance.

The Commission first collaborated across sectors to introduce public health into the transportation planning process with the passage of key legislation in 2005. That year, the US Congress passed the SAFETEA-LU, or Safe Accountable Flexible Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users. The law included Safe Routes to School funding for communities across the US to develop safe environments that encourage children to walk and bike to school.

In implementing the program locally in the East Central Region, the Wisconsin Department of Transportation encouraged organizations to build coalitions, calling multiple sectors to the table. This included law enforcement, public health professionals, county and municipal staff, school administrators, parents, teachers and advocates.

“It was easy for organizations to work together with a common vision regarding students and safety,” said Melissa Kraemer Badtke, principal transportation planner with the East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission. “Each sector brought a unique perspective that really strengthened the work we did. This experience altered the Commission’s approach to all of its programming.”

STRENGTHENING THE BOND

With the establishment of East Central’s regional Safe Routes to School program in 2009, Commission staff began working with public health departments and community coalitions on a variety of additional initiatives. This included Community Health Improvement Plans, or CHIPs. The CHIP process looks at available data, discusses community health challenges and disparities, determines priorities and develops a plan to address local health issues.

“Before we included public health in the transportation conversation with SRTS, I didn’t realize just how impactful things like transportation corridors could be for individual

and community health,” Badtke said. Obesity and inactivity are important public health concerns in the region, and encouraging children to walk and bike to school—and adults to do the same as part of their daily lives—offered a solution.

The Commission and partners identified the shared goals of increased safety and multimodal living that encourages various modes of transportation, including active transportation (walking, biking and public transit). After working on a number of municipal bicycle and pedestrian plans, in 2012 the Commission and partners engaged a cross-sector coalition to develop an ambitious regional bicycle and pedestrian plan to connect 30 communities in the Fox Cities tri-county area of Calumet, Outagamie and Winnebago.

“Not every neighborhood is equal in the opportunity to move about the community the same way. To navigate by foot or bicycle is still a challenge for some,” said Kurt Eggebrecht, health officer for the Appleton Health Department. “We saw the Commission’s work to address obesity through active transportation and felt it was natural for us to form a public health-planning partnership to link communities in the Fox Cities through a set of trails.”

The resulting *2014 Appleton (Fox Cities) Transportation Management Area (TMA) and the Oshkosh MPO Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan* serves as a model for health in planning partnerships. This plan underlined East Central Wisconsin’s commitment to health. As a result of its health in planning efforts, the Commission was selected as one of five communities across the US to beta test the Federal Highway Administration’s *Framework for Integrating Health into Transportation Corridor Planning* in 2015.

For this project, the Commission looked at the College Avenue Corridor Study to connect Appleton’s airport and its downtown. Introducing public health professionals into the transportation corridor planning process for the first time, the Commission brought together local stakeholders to study how transportation options affect the health and safety of roadway users.

When the Transportation and Health Tool came out in 2015, the Commission was ready to introduce it as another way to strengthen the bond between sectors to improve health outcomes in the region.

INTRODUCING THE TRANSPORTATION AND HEALTH TOOL

Since its early collaborations, the Commission has ensured that public health has a decision-making seat at the table beside planners from environmental, economic development, open space, land use, housing, community and transportation sectors. In fact, the Commission and its city, county and regional partners had been doing much of what the Transportation and Health Tool recommends already.

In 2016, the Commission worked with staff involved in creating and promoting the THT to host a workshop on the tool. Thirty local planners, public health practitioners, public works professionals and elected officials attended the workshop, held in the City of Oshkosh. There they gained deeper knowledge of: how transportation impacts health; how to continue working together across sectors for mutual benefit; and how to use the tool's indicators, strategies and performance measures for greater impact.

The workshop explored specific transportation and health linkages that support healthy communities. These include pedestrian- and bike-friendly design, responsible land use, private sector and community involvement, parks and public spaces, ease of access, integrated planning and collaboration. "It was great that we could apply our own best practices and lessons learned to highlight existing transportation and health efforts in the region," Badtke said. The Transportation and Health Tool workshop helped identify shared goals

and priorities. "Active transportation is really what ties transportation professionals and public health practitioners together," Badtke said. "Transportation professionals are looking at creating a cohesive transportation network by providing sidewalks, bicycle facilities and access to transit. Public health professionals look at increasing physical activity and improving overall health. They're both working to solve the problem; they just each come at it from a different perspective."

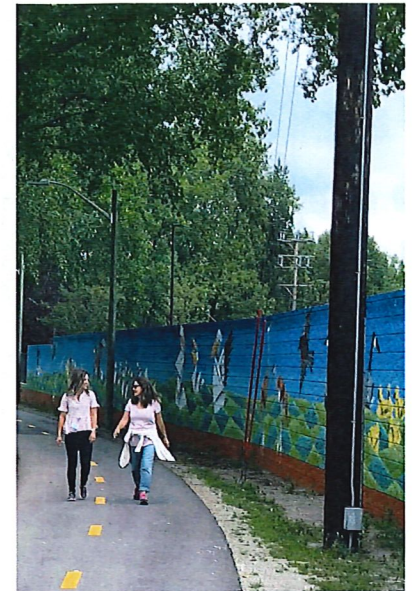
Understanding each other's language and definitions has been a challenge and an opportunity for both public health practitioners and transportation planners. Planners may not be aware of health department programming and structure. Public health practitioners may not understand how an MPO works. As they continue to work together, each sector is better able to learn about the other's profession and processes.

"Building relationships with one another in the East Central Region has helped overcome challenges," Badtke said. "Both practitioners are more comfortable asking questions now, and identifying mutually beneficial connections has become easier."

MOVING FORWARD

The health equity focus and creative community engagement strategies public health brings to the table are complimented by transportation's role in improving mobility, connecting housing and jobs and stimulating a competitive economic environment. In addition, by working together, each sector can leverage funding or jointly apply to grants, integrate data into their comprehensive plans and use one another's tools and resources.

"The Transportation and Health Tool workshop was the starting point for an ongoing discussion of the applicability



Newberry trail in Appleton

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— MELISSA KRAEMER BADTKE,
PRINCIPAL TRANSPORTATION
PLANNER, EAST CENTRAL
WISCONSIN REGIONAL PLANNING
COMMISSION



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PRINCIPAL TRANSPORTATION PLANNER

of the tool to transportation planning within the region,” Badtke said. Since the workshop, a number of projects have been completed or are under development by the Commission. Two notable initiatives involve Complete Streets policies and the wayfinding signage program.

In 2016, Smart Growth America provided the Commission technical assistance to create a regional Complete Streets policy, policies for local municipalities and the Appleton (Fox Cities) and Oshkosh MPO and a framework for communities to adopt their own Complete Streets policies through partnerships with local organizations.

“I feel like we have always followed Complete Streets policies, but we just didn't use that phrase,” said Paula Vandehey, director of the Appleton Department of Public Works. Complete Streets policies help create communities in which residents achieve and maintain a healthy weight through physical activity. And wayfinding signage increases and improves movement throughout the region for active transportation and recreation.

“Formalizing the policy helps to reinforce the message. It says that, unless there is a good reason like terrain or existing buildings right up to the road, the City Council should support sidewalks and bike lanes,” Vandehey said.

One success story comes from the Commission's collaboration with Weight of the Fox Valley, or WOTFV, an initiative to create a culture of healthy living in the Fox Valley region. WOTFV adopted the Commission's Complete Streets policies and the wayfinding signage program to help achieve its vision. Also, 12 local governments within the region voted to support a WOTFV resolution to integrate health into community planning and improvement conversations.

“This partnership builds on our mutual goals of creating a community that inspires people to be physically active through walking and bicycling in the Fox Valley.

Wayfinding signage and Complete Streets benefit people and the community through economic development, safer streets and better health,” said Sarah Wright, program manager for WOTFV.

The Commission also is using public health indicators from the Transportation and Health Tool in transportation performance measures to set targets for MPOs. It took a cue from the Transportation and Health Tool in helping the Appleton departments of Health and Public Works advocate for their 2017 Health in all Policies ordinance. This ordinance is helping to further integrate health equity into the fabric of the region. And the lessons learned from public health and planning partnerships in the East Central Region continue to grow.

The Commission works with public health professionals, community organizers and other partner organizations to advance health equity through their alliance, Fox Valley THRIVES. Together, they hosted local community engagement “Transportation and Tacos” events to assess public need. The Commission now shares booths with public health professionals at community events and conducts other joint outreach initiatives.

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The East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission is committed to identifying shared values through cross-sector partnership to support active living. By working together and learning from one another, public health and transportation planning professionals can advance health equity among the communities they serve.

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ABOUT APHA

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