Habitats for Healthy Humanity

Some cities are learning that designing more health-friendly communities can improve residents' quality of life—now and in the future.

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Health is more than just the absence of illness. As the World Health Organization puts it, wellness is comprehensive and encompasses a person's complete physical, mental and social well-being. By that definition, a healthy community is one that creates and improves people's physical and social environments. And that's why today, more attention is being paid to how we design and build our communities.

"We must be alert to the health benefits—including less stress, lower blood pressure, and overall improved physical and mental health—that can result when people live and work in accessible, safe, well-designed, thoughtful structures and landscapes," says Richard Jackson, MD, former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Environmental Health.

But let's step back in time for a moment. How did urban planners design communities in the past? To better understand how the places we live came to be, it's important to review history.

Since World War II, we've experienced a rapid growth of U.S. suburbs. The boom was fueled in part by the automobile industry and government-subsidized road-building projects. Then, because of zoning laws, residential areas were separated from commercial and industrial locations. In addition, city planners only placed educational and recreational areas in specially designated community locations. Because people lived so far away from where they worked, long distances made it almost impossible for residents to commute without a car.

Soon, walkways, bike paths and tree-lined streets gave way to wider roads and increased highway traffic. These heavily trafficked roads brought people to shopping malls that were inaccessible without a car and a lengthy drive to get there. All this resulted in an environment that no longer promoted healthy, active lifestyles.

Today, more city planners realize that community design offers a way to create quality living spaces that work with the environment to support healthy behaviors. And this realization is a good thing because "the environment will be increasingly challenged by toxic exposures, population growth, continued urbanization, and urban design that hinder healthy behaviors such as physical

activity," commented former CDC director Jeffrey Koplan in a 2000 issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association.

Two years later, the American Planning Association (APA) included public health as one of the six key elements needed to achieve smart community growth.

What's so smart about using healthy community design? For starters, it leads to more physical activity, fewer injuries, better access to healthy foods, improved air and water quality, minimized climate change effects, decreased mental health stress, a strengthened sense of community and, finally, fair access for everyone to the community's resources.

And while these goals may seem plausible only in theory, communities across the United States are starting to implement these goals into their planning. Examples include incorporating bicycle and pedestrian walkways into road design, preserving or building open spaces for parks or wildlife, making affordable housing available for people of all income levels, and constructing buildings in eco-friendly ways.

For a specific example, look at Newark, New Jersey. The city rebuilt a deteriorating area—the Lincoln Park/Coast Cultural District (LPCCD)—as a thriving, green, arts- and culture-focused community that's totally sustainable.

But the change didn't happen over night or by happenstance. Baye Adofo-Wilson, executive director of LPCCD, said a grassroots dialogue with community members lasted four years. They established that community members wanted to make their neighborhoods better, healthier places, and together, they set the goals for Lincoln Park: building certified environmentally friendly buildings, revitalizing the Newark Symphony Hall, even developing community-supported agriculture.

In general, sustainability focuses on an effort to better people's quality of life via economic development opportunities that preserve the environment for both present and future generations.

In addition to Newark, many cities around the country are experimenting with creating sustainable communities. Another is Seattle, where the city's King County saw obesity rates drop after people living in "walkable communities" became more physically active. Delaware County, near Columbus, Ohio, incorporated sustainable community concepts into its zoning laws. Now, the county plans to connect green trails and provide people with alternative transportation options.

Over in Colorado, Denver's Tri-County Health Department developed a land-use program to protect against environmental hazards, prevent illness and injury, lower carbon emissions, manage wastewater and encourage physical activity (through a system of pedestrian and bike paths and safe connections between commercial and residential spaces).

The results of these experiments yielded overwhelmingly good news. Each of these communities

achieved scientifically proven success showing that using healthy community design planning promoted healthier lifestyles.

According to the CDC, these results are solid. The agency confirms that since 1900, life expectancy in the United States has increased by 40 years. Only seven of those years can be explained by improvements in disease care, the CDC says. The rest result from prevention efforts and improvements in our environment that includes how and where we live.

If you’re looking to move, you may want to check out just where some of these healthy communities are located. To do that, visit healthyplaces@cdc.gov.

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