MERRIMACK VALLEY PLANNING COMMISSION

Housing and Health

Integrating Healthy Housing Principles Into
Housing Production Plans

2015

Contents

MERRIMACK VALLEY PLANNING COMMISSION (MVPC) - INTEGRATING HEALTH INTO HOUSING PRODUCTION PLANS – Project Description

MVPC obtained a grant from the Metropolitan Area Planning Commission (MAPC) to develop a public health planning template for Housing Production Plans (HPPs) that it may produce in 2015 and beyond.

MVPC's staff and colleagues in the public health professions share common missions and perspectives. Both aim to improve community well-being by conducting needs assessments and ensuring delivery of critical services. Planning and public health professionals do this work by collecting complex information about their constituents' social systems. They collect and monitor population-based statistics and learn from constant interactions with their communities.

City planning and health professionals have long prioritized the needs of vulnerable populations. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, city planning and public health professionals led efforts to:

- create open space for physical activity, social interaction and better mental health;
- construct safe drinking water and sewerage systems to prevent disease;
- raise housing construction and maintenance standards, and
- reduce hazardous material and injury risk exposures by enacting land use/ zoning controls and establishing boards of health.

City planning and public health professionals continue to pursue the above traditional shared commitments. They have also made commitments to:

- expanding transportation planning to encourage physical activity while reducing obesity, preventing injuries, and promoting wellness;
- developing equitable access to healthy food, civic services and access to health care (e.g., assurance of accessibility and adequacy of facilities);
- promoting sustainability through reducing energy use and greenhouse gas emissions
- increasing the public's awareness of natural resource stewardship and climate change, and
- preparing for emergencies (e.g., community infrastructure assurance, evacuation planning)

By incorporating health elements into HPPs, MVPC, and its communities can set long-term priorities for developing housing and other land uses that advance the above-shared commitments.

1. Introduction

Production and maintenance of affordable housing has been ongoing for over a century. Affordable housing practitioners' desire to produce housing that promotes public health is nothing new; however, current practitioners want to improve the affordable housing development and maintenance process so that it explicitly promotes public health.

1.1. Purpose of this Study

The MVPC's purpose in preparing this Healthy Housing Study is to provide affordable housing practitioners with an easy-to-access template for screening sites, infrastructure, and other important items that should be considered at the start of a particular housing development approval process. The purpose of the screening is to identify best practices in creating healthy living environments.

The MVPC staff intends that this is a research effort, and will construct this Study with the best practices that it identifies.

The MVPC will use this Template in subsequent Housing Production Plans that it produces for its member communities. The MVPC expects, if requested, to share this Template with the Commonwealth and other Massachusetts Regional Planning Agencies for their distribution and use.

1.2.   MVMPO Region Housing Advisory Group

There are a number of agencies working in the MVMPO region to monitor and address housing needs.

- Newburyport Unitarian Church – Poverty Discussion Group
- Emmaus, Inc.
- Community Action, Inc.
- Bethany Communities
- Archdiocese of Boston / Planning Office for Urban Affairs
- Municipal housing authorities

The MVMPO staff is working to increase its contacts with these and other agencies involved in affordable housing, for we all understand that housing is an important social determinant of physical and mental health and well-being.

2. Housing and Health

The adoption of new "health in all policies" approach by the federal government provides an opportunity to foster a dialogue that can lead to new partnerships and stronger policies that advance health and housing objectives in equal measure. By developing a framework for improving those aspects of housing that impact health, we can help ensure that housing policy and neighborhood design make maximum possible contribution to the health of children, older adults, and all community members. Research indicates that housing affects health in many ways:

- Housing quality can impact physiological health, psychological health, and safety. Think lead, radon, mold, noise, fires.
- Unaffordable housing costs affect health by reducing the income a family has available for food and health care. High housing costs also lead to residential instability and crowding which can lead to health issues.
- Physical neighborhood attributes affect health by facilitating or impairing the ability to walk, bike, and the overall access to transportation, parks and food stores.
- Social and community attributes such as concentrations of poverty, also have negative health implications.

Despite the many connections between health and housing, the two sectors normally operate on parallel tracks without collaboration or interconnection. One exception is in homelessness policy where housing, health, and policy advocates have worked together to craft solutions that have proven effective in reducing chronic homelessness. Some specific areas of intersection between health and housing where work has begun that can be incorporated into housing plans are:

- **Housing for Older Adults -** We have made great strides in bridging these health and housing gaps to ensure that older adults have access to safe and healthy housing as well as the services they need to live independent lives and avoid costly nursing home care. This issue will rapidly grow in size and significance as "baby-boomers" continue to age and therefore needs sustained attention to ensure we continue to create viable elder communities which produce health care savings and minimize hospitalization.
- **Affordable, Walkable Communities -** To reduce obesity and the health issues it causes, the public health field has focused on fostering walkable communities with good access to parks and services. We have come to realize that walking 30 minutes a day improves blood pressure, improves fitness, lowers risk of heart disease, alleviates depression, and produces other positive outcomes. We have rightly developed more walkable neighborhoods, but their success and demand has sometimes caused rents and home

prices in these areas to rise, making them unaffordable to moderate and low income households. We need to ensure that "healthy neighborhoods", as they continue to rise in demand, also retain an affordable component.

- **Residential Stability -** Most understand that extreme residential instability - homelessness - has a negative impact on health; but frequent moves, eviction, foreclosure, and living in doubled up housing are also related to elevated stress levels and depression. More focus on the impact of residential instability on health is needed so we may better understand its implications. Helping individuals stay stably housed is important, as excessive mobility appears to undermine school achievement in children.

- **Healthy Housing in Healthy Neighborhoods -** Neighborhoods often go through cycles of investment and disinvestment. The consequences of this for safety and community development outcomes are well recognized, but the health implications need closer examination. Decisions by property owners to stop investing in their properties can lead to the decline of a neighborhood and concentrations of poverty and the negative health implications it brings. Conversely, the upgrading and repair of homes as they age can contribute to positive neighborhood effects that facilitate safety and walkability and healthier lives.

3. Regional Housing Production – SWOT Analysis

The MVPC region's communities have all produced some affordable housing. What are their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats?

Strengths

- Successful grant skills
- Means-tested conditions to take advantage of publicly-funded housing programs
- Property acquisition costs in many locations were competitive or advantageous compared to other regions
- Updated Housing Production Plans
- Presence of faith-based and other community-based organizations with capacity to develop housing
- Infrastructure in place
- Services in place, i.e. Councils on Aging, hospitals, retail, civic facilities
- Some willingness to share resources, i.e. transportation

Weaknesses

- Pockets of poverty in coastal communities
- Housing security
- Unmet transportation needs
- Limited financial and organizational resources in some communities
- Opposition to densification, even in traditionally high density neighborhoods
- Support services needed in addition to housing for some households
- Site contamination

Opportunities

- Continued revitalization efforts in Greater Lawrence and Haverhill, i.e. foundations development
- Improving economy
- Continued public transit and healthy transportation project development

Threats

- Declining Federal capability to finance housing? HUD issues?

- Protection of existing affordable housing stocks (dealing with expiring use financing), apartment to condominium conversions, multi-family to single-family conversions in region's more affluent communities (Newburyport in particular).

4.   Establishing Priorities for Healthy Housing Production

- Civic facilities: 1 mile to municipal offices, libraries,
- Medical Facilities: within 1 hour transit access
- Recreation: within one mile
- Transportation: walkability: ½ mile to transit, 1 mile to bicycle facilities, 1 hour or less transit to human services agencies

4.1 Health Starts Where You live ,Work, and Play - Healthy Community Design

The way we design and build our communities can affect our physical and mental health. This fact sheet from the CDC explains healthy community design and its health benefits.

What Is Healthy Community Design?

Healthy community design is planning and designing communities that make it easier for people to live healthy lives. Healthy community design offers important benefits:

- Decreases dependence on the automobile by building homes, businesses, schools, churches and parks closer to each other so that people can more easily walk or bike between them.
- Provides opportunities for people to be physically active and socially engaged as part of their daily routine, improving the physical and mental health of its citizens.
- Allows persons, if they choose, to age in place and remain all their lives in a community that reflects their changing lifestyles and changing physical capabilities.
- Ensure access to affordable and healthy food, especially fruits and vegetables.

What Are the Health Benefits of Healthy Community Design?

Healthy community design can provide many advantages:

- Promote physical activity.
- Improve air quality.
- Lower risk of injuries.
- Improve healthy eating habits.
- Increase social connection and sense of community.
- Reduce contributions to climate change.

What Are Some Healthy Community Design Principles?

Healthy community design includes a variety of principles:

- Encourage mixed land use and greater land density to shorten distances between homes, workplaces, schools and recreation so people can walk or bike more easily to them.
- Provide good mass transit to reduce the dependence upon automobiles.

- Build good pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, including sidewalks and bike paths that are safely removed from automobile traffic as well as good right of way laws and clear, easy-to-follow signage.
- Ensure affordable housing is available for people of all income levels.
- Create community centers where people can gather and mingle as part of their daily activities.
- Offer access to green space and parks.
- Create outlets for fresh fruits and vegetables, such as community gardens and farmers markets.

Conclusion

Designing and building healthy communities can improve the quality of life for all people who live, work, worship, learn, and play within their borders—where every person is free to make choices amid a variety of healthy, available, accessible, and affordable options.

Healthy community design links the traditional concepts of planning (such as land use, transportation, community facilities, parks, and open space) with health themes (such as physical activity, public safety, healthy food access, mental health, air and water quality, and social equity issues).

5. Components of a Public Health Planning Template for Use in a Housing Production Plan.

1. This section of a housing plan cannot be merely inserted into the document. <u>A public visioning process, including surveys and community engagement is vitally important to "selling" the public health component of the plan.</u> Experience has shown in other successful communities with public health components in their long-range plans that use of games, videos and social media [facebook, twitter] during the survey and community engagement process will make the process more interesting to the public. The City of Grand Rapids adopted a game called "Green Pursuits" which was a spin off Trivial Pursuits that included question cards and an answer booklet for residents to record their responses as well as a city map where they could mark desired areas for green infrastructure interventions. Other examples include the City of Chino, CA's sending out newsletters to residents in quarterly utility bills; and setting up booths at community events to distribute materials, etc.

2. Stakeholder engagement is vitally important. Local hospitals MUST be included as they have vital data and input that can be learned from. The school department should not be overlooked as they implement many health-related plans in schools related to public health for our children, such as obesity, balanced nutritional meals, sex education, smoking cessation, etc. Also, local organizations that work with our children in our communities, such as local YMCAs and YWCAs should also be included. They also have data and input that can be learned from – they also are eligible for funding through the Center for Disease Control such as the ACHIEVE grant to help implement work in a healthy housing plan. Other partners could include local foundations, land trusts, farmers markets, horticultural groups, etc.. Also, include universities/academic institutions, nonprofits, physician groups, faith groups, etc.

3. Data is key. A community health needs assessment should be conducted during the survey process. Data can be derived from state and local agencies, such as the MA Department of Public Health. For example, the City of Chino, California had results from their Healthy Chino Coalition that highlighted poor rates of physical fitness and overweight and obesity statistics among Chino's youth. This served to motivate the city to focus on the health of its residents. Data is useful and a driving force in future planning. For example, if a community had statistical data revealing that its residents had an opioid crisis on hand, it can help to spur a public awareness campaign, create new partnerships with local emergency services departments and schools and universities, that result in policies in the Healthy Housing section of Housing Plans. Also, encourage local health coalitions to participate in the planning process. They may point out an issue such obesity, which is an issue many communities can identify with, and it may encourage the development of walkable neighborhoods.

4. The incorporation of health into housing plans is not just a planning department/housing board project.   All municipal departments should be included. The document will not contain the relevant data needed for achieving the goals of the plan without inter-departmental cooperation.   Specifically, departments such as public works, public health, GIS, conservation, recreation, and housing authority should have input.

5. Once the data assessment is complete and during the public visioning process, residents may appreciate participating in mapping of their neighborhood assets; maps can then be produced that show the community focal points and the linkages (or lack of) between them.

6. Communities should consider incorporating the health component into their master plan as well as the open space and recreation plan. Conversely, relevant data from the existing community's master plan and open space and recreation should be included in the housing plan. It will serve as excellent baseline data for which discussions can begin upon.

7. As in other sections of housing plans, the heath section may contain goals, measurable objectives and specific timelines for completion of each goal and objective at the end of the document so that communities can assess their achievements.

8. Consider using simple terms that don't focus directly on health.   Terms such as "quality of life", "community character" and 'sustainability" are easy for the public to connect to.

9. A listing of funding sources to achieve the goals and objectives in this section of the plan will be helpful.   Municipalities have difficult budgets. Knowing where they can access funding to implement their goals will be helpful.   Some sources of funding include the Center for Disease Control through local universities or MA State Department of Public Health.   They fund important programs that will help educate our member communities.   Community Development Block Grants [CDBG], HUD Sustainable Communities, Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality funding are all sources of funding communities can pursue.   In addition, there are private foundation grant funds that may be utilized in local communities and should be researched.   Also, explore funding specific for health purposes, for example, hiring new staff or supporting the work of health coalitions.

10. Existing zoning bylaws and other policies should be evaluated to ensure they are in place or being considered in order to promote healthier housing in new developments:
    - Examine table of uses to ensure that outdoor farmer's markets are allowed in the community – is this something to consider as an outright permitted use so permitting process is easier
    - Low Impact Development
    - Open Space Residential Development

- Transit Oriented Development – close proximity to nearby transit is crucial for walkable communities
- Proximity to local grocery stores within walking distance
- Proximity to basic retail services within walking distance
- Expedited Permitting for these types of projects to ensure a smooth permitting process [43D]
- 40R, the Smart Growth Zoning Act, also promotes affordable housing and includes an expedited permitting process
- Sidewalks and cross-walks are provided for ample pedestrian connectivity.   [is there also room to walk the dog?]
- Ample green space as well as recreational areas [is there room for children to play?]
- Bike racks and bike paths
- Trails
- Green Buildings
- Storm-water management
- Ample shade/tree canopies
- Air Quality Analysis is completed
- Traffic Analysis and Traffic Studies are completed
- Access/Egress to site is deemed safe and is adequate for pedestrians and vehicle turning radius' are adequate
- Adequate emergency personnel
- Potable Water is important.   Healthy, drinkable water means healthier residents, and drinking water helps to address the obesity problem.
- Ample parking.
- Handicapped parking for the disabled is necessary.

11. Five sub-chapters of housing plan sections could include the following:
    a. Fitness
    b. Health and Human Services
    c. Nutrition
    d. Public Education
    e. Safe and Walkable neighborhoods

Remember, the reason data is important is because it connects residents with existing issues and helps motivate them to improve their public health issues.   For example, issues like obesity in children as well as the opioid crisis impacts communities on a

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global level and are issues they can identify with, and will want to see addressed in their plan.   Most residents want their children to be healthy; most residents want their crime rates to go down and there is crime associated with opioid addiction.   These types of data and statistics which can also be obtained from local and state emergency services, will help motivate a community to reach the desired goal of healthy communities. Many health departments have data that can be extremely useful and helpful in conducting an analysis of healthy communities/healthy neighborhoods. It is data routinely gathered but in the past only used by health professionals. Now that health is an issue brought to the forefront by new federal policies, closer collaboration between health departments, health agencies, and planners will be vital.

6. Example Policies for Creating Healthy Housing/Healthy Neighborhoods

The following is a list of policies categorized by various topics. Most of these are extracted from an APA Toolkit. The policies are intended to be examples only, but present some of the most commonly used healthy housing/healthy community design policies in use. Every community developing a Housing Plan should should review these example policies and incorporate various elements into their plans where appropriate.

<u>Walkability and Connectivity</u>

- Establish a communitywide walkability standard of ¼ mile for access to neighborhood services, transit and recreational facilities.
- Require all mixed-use development to include design elements that facilitate walkability and bikeability.
- Promote walking and bicycling as a safe and convenient mode of transportation.
- Establish locational standards in cooperation with local school districts that will provide for walkable and bikeable access.
- Require transit oriented development (TOD) to satisfy minimum density and intensity development standards to support the local transit system.
- Require new development, and where appropriate, existing development to satisfy local complete streets design standards.

<u>Land Use Growth Management</u>

- Encourage, and when appropriate, provide incentives for infill development.
- Promote walkability and public transit by encouraging mixed-use, higher-density development close to community amenities.
- Work with the appropriate local, state, and federal agencies to promote the clean-up and reuse of contaminated sites to protect human and environmental health.
- Provide higher-density and infill mixed-use development affordable to all incomes on vacant and underutilized parcels.
- Promote mixed-use infill development on vacant and underutilized parcels along commercial corridors.
- Minimize conflicts between land uses to protect human and environmental health and safety, preserve community character and retain job generating activities that have long-term viability.
- Promote development standards and land use patterns that encourage long-term sustainability.
- Promote efficient growth in existing urban areas and protection of open space.
- Participate in ongoing multi-jurisdictional regional transportation planning efforts.
- Encourage a range of housing types that meet the diverse needs of the community.

<u>Neighborhood Safety</u>

- Encourage private landowners to maintain and upgrade their property in neighborhoods, commercial corridors and industrial areas.
- Protect viable neighborhoods and commercial areas from adverse impacts of vacant and underutilized sites and blighted buildings and structures.
- Promote safe and walkable neighborhoods and inter-connected streets through the design of streetscapes, public gathering places and all types of physical development.
- Reduce crime and violence and maintain safe and clean neighborhoods and public spaces.
- Promote a safe and comfortable walking environment along key commercial corridors and neighborhood streets.

<u>Housing Location, Affordability and Diversity</u>

- Promote the integration of affordable housing in new infill development.
- Amend the zoning ordinance to allow alternative housing options.
- Provide a range of house types and affordable housing units within walking distance of schools and other community facilities (libraries, transit centers, community centers, health clinics and similar facilities).
- Maintain neighborhood continuity by encouraging access to new affordable housing developments for existing residents.
- Maintain the availability of an adequate and diverse supply of quality housing units to meet the needs of all income levels and continue to encourage development of additional quality and affordable housing units.
- Support and encourage development of a range of housing types that meet the needs of a broad range of population groups including seniors, large and small families, low and middle-income households and people of all abilities.
- Promote mixed-income development and a range of affordable housing options in all neighborhoods (e.g., Land Trusts, cohousing and supportive housing).
- Protect public health and safety in all affordable housing units within the community whether privately or public/non-profit owned and managed.
- Support development and rehabilitation of homes to protect children and vulnerable populations from housing-related health and safety hazards (e.g., lead-based paint; asbestos-containing materials and other demonstrated health and safety concerns).
- Encourage development and rehabilitation of healthy homes that address health concerns including lead based paint mitigation, mold and moisture reduction, dust control, radon and carbon monoxide control, indoor air quality improvement, integrated pest management, and smoke-free housing.
- Promote mixed-income development and inclusion of affordable housing units in all neighborhoods.
- Require developers to provide a range of housing types and residential densities to meet the needs of all age groups, income levels, and household sizes.

- Promote active use of public spaces in neighborhoods and commercial areas at all times of day to provide "eyes-on-the-street."

<u>Active Lifestyle</u>

- Expand park and recreation opportunities in all neighborhoods and ensure that they are provided within comfortable walking distance of homes, schools and businesses in order to encourage more physically and socially active lifestyles.
- Develop a comprehensive network of multi-use trails including to enhance bicycle and pedestrian connectivity throughout the City and the region.
- Improve connections to parks, open space and recreational facilities through an interconnected network of pedestrian-friendly green streets, multimodal corridors and trails.
- Expand park and recreation opportunities in all neighborhoods and ensure that they are offered within comfortable walking distance of homes, schools and businesses in order to encourage more physically and socially active lifestyles.
- Increase opportunities to incorporate green space as part of the urban environment.
- Expand and tailor recreational programs and services to meet evolving community needs.
- Conserve, protect and enhance natural and cultural resources.

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