

neighborhoods and communities

QUALITY OF LIFE IS ENHANCED IN COMMUNITIES WHERE THERE ARE FRIENDLY RELATIONSHIPS AMONG NEIGHBORS; WHERE THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT IS ATTRACTIVE, FUNCTIONAL, AND DESIGNED AT A HUMAN SCALE; AND WHERE RESIDENTS FEEL THEY CAN LIVE A SAFE AND HEALTHY LIFE. PROXIMITY OF HOUSING TO EMPLOYMENT, SCHOOLS, PARKS, SHOPPING, AND OTHER SERVICES HELPS CREATE WALKABLE, VIBRANT NEIGHBORHOODS. CONCENTRATING MOST NEW DEVELOPMENT IN DEVELOPMENT FOCUS AREAS WILL PROVIDE THAT PROXIMITY AND MAKE IT POSSIBLE TO INVEST IN THE QUALITY OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT.

healthy communities

Healthy communities are not only more enjoyable places to live, but provide numerous additional benefits. These types of communities typically have lower health care costs, less absenteeism, lower levels of anxiety, and fewer injuries. According to Smart Growth America's 2014 report *Measuring Sprawl* people living in more compact, connected areas have longer, healthier, and safer lives in addition to greater access to economic opportunities. The report's findings indicate residents in these types of communities spend less on the combined cost of transportation and housing and have more transportation options available to meet their needs.

This chapter addresses how the built environment impacts public health and safety. Healthy communities are designed in a way that provides people equitable access to a high quality of life regardless of age, income, or ability. Mixed land uses bring people closer to the places where they work, play, and access goods and services. Community members are not dependent on cars, but instead enjoy safe bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure along with other transportation options that promote physical activity for all abilities. Public spaces and meeting places are easily accessible and inviting for social gathering and interactions, and no one is forced to be socially isolated. Transit, parks, natural areas, and healthy foods are readily available to all community members. Safe community design minimizes exposure to crime, accidents, violence, and hazards. An accessible community with housing for all segments of the population that is close to services and facilities and well served by mobility options is a more equitable community. It allows all people to be integrated into community life regardless of whether or not they suffer from physical, mental, or developmental impairments, or have mobility limited by age or income.

PRINCIPLE

Tompkins County should be a place where the built environment promotes healthy, safe, and active lifestyles.

POLICIES

It is the policy of Tompkins County to:

- Promote bicycling and walking throughout the county by making these transportation modes safe, efficient, and appealing options.
- Encourage the development of lively streets with a variety of opportunities for daily activity, recreation, and social interaction.
- Foster the expansion of a countywide trail network.
- Encourage efforts to improve the accessibility of the built environment to allow everyone to participate in community life.
- Promote parks, community facilities, recreational activities, and networks that support regular social interaction and physical activity.
- Discourage land uses that threaten community health and safety.

SNAPSHOT OF THE COUNTY TODAY

Health of Tompkins County Residents

In March 2014, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation released findings indicating Tompkins County was the second healthiest county in New York as measured in four categories: health behavior, clinical care, social and economic factors, and physical environment. Among the social and physical environment factors analyzed were access to exercise opportunities, proximity to health providers, availability of social support networks, and level of community safety. While these findings identify many positive aspects of community health, the Tompkins County Health Department's *Community Health Assessment 2013-2017* tried to capture a comprehensive picture of the physical health of the county's residents. The report notes nearly one out of every three middle- and high-school students in Tompkins County is overweight or obese, and it lists making "opportunities to engage in healthy lifestyle activities for adults and children, particularly young families" as a high priority.

Social health, which involves the abilities to form satisfying interpersonal relationships and to adapt comfortably and act appropriately in various situations, can be impacted by physical development and design and is important to the well-being of both individuals and the larger community. Social health issues for young people are highlighted in the 2012 *State of Tompkins County Youth* report prepared by Tompkins County Youth Services. Residents between the ages of 15 and 18 indicated "the need for community gathering places for youth to socialize and hang out in a positive environment." This report also notes "transportation remains a barrier for youth to participate in activities and to secure employment." While much of Tompkins County is designed to support healthy living, one does not have to look far to find locations where activities of community members are limited based on poor design and the dominance of the automobile. Social health also significantly affects mental health.

Social health can be impacted by physical development and design.

Improving how all people access and utilize trail networks benefits public health, natural resource conservation, quality of life, social connections and tourism.

The Built Environment

STREETS. Street, road, site, and neighborhood design play a key role in how safe and inviting communities are to walk, bike, take transit, and participate in neighborhood events. Street design that encourages these behaviors includes lane widths that balance the needs of all street users, on-street parking designed to accommodate cyclists and drivers, adequate crossing times and sensors for pedestrians and cyclists, street trees to buffer pedestrians from traffic, building facades in close proximity to the street with interesting design features, adequate space for buses to decelerate and accelerate at bus stops, and safe areas for transit riders to wait for, board, and exit buses. Although there are areas in the county where this level of preferred design is seen, there are many other areas where these aspects are absent, limiting access to various destinations and opportunities for social interaction.

The *Tompkins County Walkability Assessment Methodology and Case Studies* (2007) examined the areas of Northeast Ithaca and the Village of Trumansburg. This study's detailed analysis of street and sidewalk conditions resulted in making one of the priority goals to "provide safer, more accessible walking routes to desired destinations" including schools. Municipalities are working to make those improvements, including the recently developed *City of Ithaca Sidewalk Policy* (2014). This policy more comprehensively addresses sidewalk needs in the City, replacing piecemeal repairs and construction by property owners with the City taking responsibility, resulting in reduced costs and faster rates of improvements.

PARKS, TRAILS, AND RECREATION. Accessible regional trail networks, public open spaces, and community facilities that connect all residents are also components of the built environment that increase activity levels, provide opportunities for social interaction, and result in health benefits. Studies from Active Living Research¹ indicate people with very good access to public open space are 50 percent more likely to achieve high levels of walking, defined as walking 180 minutes or more a week.

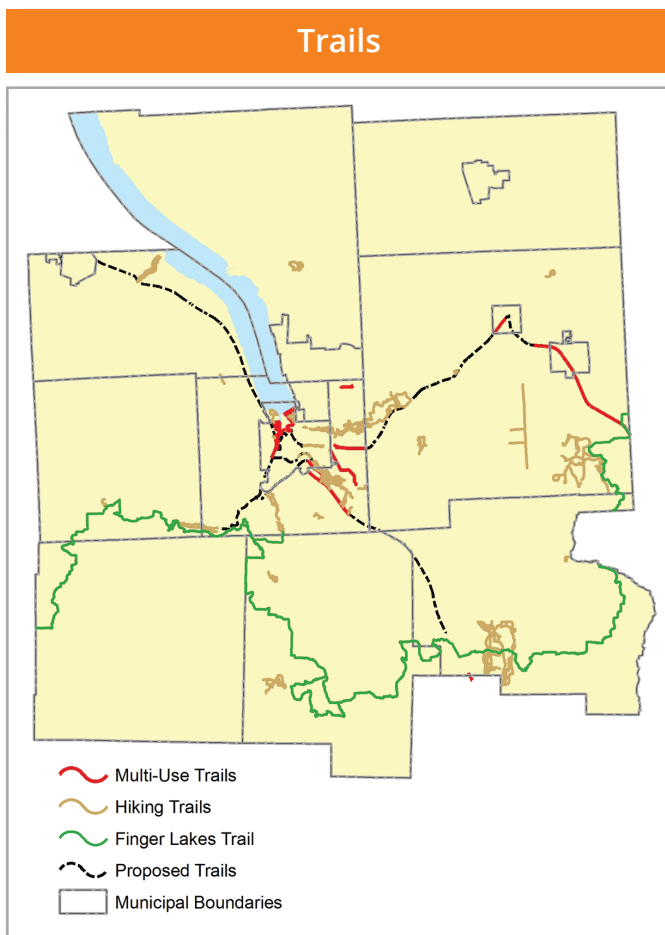
New York State operates four State Parks within the county, each of which offer a

broad range of recreation opportunities including boating at Allan H. Treman State Marine Park, swimming at Robert H. Treman State Park, hiking the gorge trail at Buttermilk Falls State Park, and viewing wildlife and the spectacular waterfall at Taughannock Falls State Park. Additionally, municipalities maintain nearly 500 acres of parkland including the frequented City of Ithaca parks at the southern end of Cayuga Lake. These are complemented by Cornell University Natural Areas and Finger Lakes Land Trust Preserves that provide additional opportunities for outdoor recreational activities. Due to this abundance, the County does not own or operate any parkland.

Tompkins County is fortunate to have a number of safe community trails, many of which weave through rural areas and provide connections to population centers. Important trail corridors include the Black Diamond Trail, the Ithaca-Dryden Trail, the South Hill Recreation Way, the East Hill Recreation Way, the Cayuga Waterfront Trail, the Gateway Trail, and the Finger Lakes Trail. Beyond transportation and recreation impacts, formalizing and improving how all people access and utilize these trail networks benefits public

health, natural resource conservation, quality of life, social connections, and tourism.

Community members of all ages also heavily rely on school-based and other recreational opportunities and facilities for physical activity opportunities and opportunities to socialize. Recreational programming is well supported at local parks and municipal spaces through efforts of the inter-municipal Recreation Partnership, which includes accessibility as one of its program values. The Towns of Dryden, Groton, Lansing, Newfield, and Ulysses (together with the Village of Trumansburg), and the City of Ithaca, through its Youth Bureau, each maintain a recreation department which provides facilities ranging from parks and playing fields to swimming pools, skating rinks, pavilions, trails, and more. The Towns of Caroline, Danby, and Enfield, the County, and Village of Lansing are also members of the Recreation Partnership. Programming ranges from day camps to swim lessons, concerts, movie nights, sports leagues, and various special events. Although many recreational opportunities cater to children, older residents also depend on safe access to events at the local colleges and universities, the eight



Source: Tompkins County Planning Department



Active Use of Multi-Use Trail

Photo by TCPD

regional libraries, and agencies such as the Greater Ithaca Activities Center, Cornell Cooperative Extension, Southside Community Center, Lifelong Center, and community halls in rural areas.

Development patterns that widely separate housing, shopping areas, schools, and other community destinations reduce the ability of individuals to independently travel between destinations and interact with one another. Mixing land uses – commercial, residential, recreational, educational, and others – in neighborhoods or places accessible by bicycle, by transit, and on foot can foster lively and diverse communities. A mix of uses attracts people to shop, meet friends, and live in neighborhoods like Fall Creek in the City of Ithaca or villages like Trumansburg, two areas that have seen rapid appreciation in the value of residential real estate. Although such areas exist throughout the county, there are opportunities to create more.

Healthy Food

Access to healthy local food is another key component that promotes health. Farmers in and near Tompkins County offer a number of ways to access fresh local food including farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), and you-pick operations, along with restaurants and grocery stores that offer local food options. In the third of the county that

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is actively farmed, dairy remains the dominant industry, although farm types are increasingly diverse, including a higher percentage of vegetable, soybean, and poultry operations. The majority of these enterprises occur on smaller sized farms which often directly market to Tompkins County consumers. Several programs exist to promote access to healthy food for all including community gardens, acceptance of food stamps at farmers markets, subsidized CSA shares, and efforts to bring fresh, local produce into schools.

ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Examining how both our youngest and oldest residents interact with our community and each other provides a helpful basis for identifying opportunities to improve community design to benefit both physical and mental health outcomes. By 2040, children and seniors will make up almost half of the national population. The U.S. Surgeon General's *National Prevention Strategy* (2011) identifies increasing the number of Americans who are healthy at every stage of life as its primary goal. The strategy includes recommendations to “encourage community design and development that supports physical activity,” and to “facilitate social connectedness and community engagement across the lifespan.” This physical activity and sense of community can be increased through local efforts to improve the accessibility and safety of the built environment, pedestrian connections, and recreational opportunities.

These types of community design impact mental health. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control's *Built Environment and Health Initiative* notes that good design can reduce mental health stresses. For example, access to green space has been linked to faster recovery from illnesses and injuries, improved ability of children to concentrate, and reduced levels of both property and violent crimes. Community design is also a social equity issue, as poor quality design has often been concentrated in areas with poorer or minority populations.



Photo by Ithaca Tompkins County Convention and Visitors Bureau

Ithaca Farmers Market

Land Uses*

Mixed land uses are critical to achieving great places to live, work, and play. A mix of land uses supports a more varied population and a wider commercial base to support public transit. People with disabilities report a greater difficulty in meeting daily needs, including those related to physical and social wellness, in areas where such a mix does not exist. Mixed land uses can enhance the vitality and security of an area by increasing the number of people using sidewalks and walkways. A mix of land uses also helps to revitalize community life because streets, public spaces, community buildings, and retail establishments again become places where people meet and talk.

Some land uses and management practices may be incompatible with a healthy and safe community. Several municipalities in Tompkins County have put in place bans on certain heavy industrial activities that would conflict with local comprehensive plans and community goals, and the County has banned the use of byproducts of gas drilling activities on County roads. The County has also passed a Neighbor Notification Law to require that adjoining property owners be informed when pesticide application is planned. The County and municipalities, often by their joint efforts through the Tompkins County Council of Governments, need to continue to be alert to such potential threats to health and safety and devise appropriate responses.

Streets and Roads**

While there are many segments of streets and roads in the county that do a good job of accommodating all modes of transportation, overall there is room for improvement among most of the county's transportation network, as evidenced by only 47 percent of the streets in the City and villages having sidewalks. Vehicles were involved in 62 accidents involving bicyclists or pedestrians during 2013, resulting in 12 serious injuries and 37 minor injuries to those cycling or walking.

When streets and roads are designed for the safety of all users, positive street activity increases and people more fully engage in their communities. Studies have shown that

if people perceive a safety issue in their community, their likelihood of engaging in physical activity is reduced. Neighborhood design which encourages informal social interactions provides natural "eyes-on-the-street" surveillance that discourages crime and increases street use. In community planning, it is important that decisions are made with public safety in mind. Lighting levels appropriate to the use of the

area, street crossings that are short and well-paved, seating that allows for rest and refuge from the elements, and landscaping that allows people to clearly see each other and traffic are among key elements of a safe street. Safer, more interesting corridors for pedestrians, bikes, and transit riders reduces congestion and dangerous conflicts as more road users feel comfortable using alternatives to personal vehicles, which also improves the experience for remaining motorists. Streets that are

designed and safely accessible for all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, transit riders, and drivers, are commonly referred to as complete streets. Intermunicipal cooperation is critical to ensuring the safety and continuity of pedestrian, bike, and transit amenities and healthy communities across the county.

Recognizing the impact safe design has on transit riders' health and willingness to use public transportation, Tompkins County Area Transit (TCAT) has worked with local municipalities to improve facilities to create safe, comfort-

A mix of land uses supports a more varied population and a wider commercial base to support public transit.



Streets Alive! Event on Cayuga Street, City of Ithaca

* For more information see the Development Patterns Chapter, "Livability Through Good Design" section.

** For more information see the Transportation Chapter, "Shifting People from Driving Alone" section.

able waiting and boarding areas for transit riders. It will be important for these efforts to continue, with an increased emphasis on improvements along rural routes such as park and rides where safe, pleasant waiting areas for transit riders of all ages and abilities could be provided.

Reducing the number of people relying on personal vehicles reduces air pollution, resulting in public health benefits. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), 51 percent of the carbon monoxide in typical U.S. cities comes from vehicles, with vehicle emissions contributing significant amounts of the air pollutants that affect human health, including those with chemical sensitivities, and the environment. The transportation sector consistently uses the most energy and emits the most greenhouse gases within Tompkins County. Although Tompkins County is considered an “attainment” area by the EPA, an area that does better than the national ambient air quality standard under the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990, there are consistent concerns that air monitoring stations making these determinations are located outside of Tompkins County and may not provide truly accurate local data.

Parks, Trails and Recreational Facilities*

The *Tompkins Priority Trails Strategy* (2014) identifies the key trails in the community which would form the basis of a 51-mile system of connected multi-use paths and 69 miles of pedestrian-only thru-hiker trails. With added investment to complete and connect them, many of these trails can become transportation pathways for walking and bicycling. Implementing this strategy has obvious recreational benefits, but many of the trail improvements also lend themselves to increased commuter opportunities.

A large portion of the community’s parks and recreational facilities are located in areas that are difficult to access without a vehicle. It is important to locate recreational amenities in areas that can be reached by walking, cycling, and transit so users can access them without relying on personal vehicles. This is particularly important given the demographic shift anticipated, where the number of older adults is expected to double by 2030. The need for recreational spaces to support the needs of older adults, and people with

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disabilities, will only become more important over time, as will the accessibility of these facilities to non-drivers as more people forego driving by choice or necessity. Current efforts, such as TCAT’s summer routes to several area parks, can be built upon to improve the accessibility of park and recreational facilities. Care should also be taken to increase opportunities for those with disabilities so that they can more actively enjoy the region’s parks, trails, and recreational facilities.

Neighborhood Design**

Dependence on the automobile for even the shortest household trips increases the number of vehicles using the streets, limits social interaction among neighbors, and limits mobility for non-drivers, adding to the increasing trend of social isolation. The 28,237 Tompkins County residents commuting to work alone as of 2012 and 67,008 trips taken by seniors and those in need of paratransit on Gadabout in 2013 indicate automobile dependence remains high.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Rural Assistance Center identifies the disconnect between family and community and social isolation as risk factors for developing certain mental health conditions and for increasing substance abuse. New housing development can be designed to incorporate streets and sidewalks that connect to the broader community fabric. Native vegetation and landscape reinforce the sense of place and connection and should be an integral part of neighborhood design.



Gadabout Traveling Through the City of Ithaca

* For more information see the Natural Resources Chapter, “Access” section.

** For more information see the Development Patterns Chapter, “Livability Through Good Design” section.

Houses can be oriented in a way that facilitates spontaneous social interactions while also allowing privacy. Both neighborhoods and homes should be designed in a way to encourage visitability, meaning designed in a way that can be lived in or visited by people who have trouble with steps or who use wheelchairs or walkers. Strong social connections and familiarity with neighbors and community are also vital for crime prevention and sense of safety.

Housing Design

Housing design that enables independence can be a preventive form of health care that ultimately reduces demands on services. Residential development can be situated and designed in a way that enables people of all physical ability levels to live as independently as possible while reducing environmental stressors, a concept sometimes referred to as universal or enabling design. New residences, as well as home retrofits, should include features such as adequate lighting, 32-inch clear doorways, and zero grade entries to allow for easy use of walkers and wheelchairs, and at least an accessible half bath on the first floor so that people of varying abilities can live in and visit these homes.

It is important to not limit improvements to older populations as the term universal design often implies. Doorknobs should be designed for smaller hands, storage should be accessible for those tall and short alike, and automobiles should not be a requirement for participation in society no matter one's age or level of function. Public investments should always be made in a fashion that supports design that allows all people to thrive.

Healthy Food

Options to obtain healthy food in Tompkins County are steadily improving. Throughout the year, the Ithaca Farmer's Market continues to thrive downtown, on the Cayuga Inlet, and near East Hill Plaza. Building on this market's success, several towns and villages support smaller-scale markets bringing more healthy food options to these communities.

Diverse commercial agricultural activities provide a variety of healthy food options, from locally produced dairy products to Community Supported Agriculture shares of fruits and vegetables. Other creative programs that help make the connections between healthy local food and consumers include Cornell Cooperative Extension's Meat Locker Project, where consumers can rent space in a collective walk-in freezer to store locally purchased bulk meat in lieu of obtain-

ing a home freezer. In addition, more residents are growing their own food at home or in community gardens.

Although many of the farmers' markets now accept SNAP (food stamp) benefits and other programs for low-income seniors and families with children, one of the challenges moving forward will be making sure healthy food is both affordable and easily accessible to underserved populations. The Food Bank of the Southern Tier estimated that in 2013, 13 percent of the county's population was food insecure. The number of individuals and families requesting food assistance through local food pantries, shelters, and other providers continues to increase. These providers and programs, such as free and reduced price meals in schools and SNAP benefits, are vital to addressing hunger among lower income community members. Land use regulations can be written to allow access to healthy food in both commercial areas and roadside stands. As noted in the Natural Resources section, the protection of high quality farmland within the county is paramount to allowing regular access to healthy, locally sourced food.

TAKING ACTION

STRATEGIES. Actions that support this chapter are included in the ITCTC's *2035 Long Range Transportation Plan* (2014) and the *Tompkins Priority Trails Strategy* (2014). The *Long Range Transportation Plan* identified initiatives, such as safety education, support for the expansion of bicycling and walking, and incorporation of "complete street" features in roads within the urbanized area. The actions identified within the *Priority Trails Strategy* will assist the development and maintenance of five key trails to create an outstanding trail-based recreation and transportation network. One of those five trails is the Black Diamond Trail, connecting the four State Parks in the county.

The Tompkins County Health Department's *Community Health Improvement Plan 2013-2017* also provides strategies and suggested partnership activities to address the community's most pressing health concerns. Although actions are closely aligned with public health efforts, they provide guidance for productive partnerships to pursue in an effort to ensure the community advances its desired health outcomes.

PARTNERS. Healthy communities rely heavily on the design of the built environment, and require those working in public health, transportation, historic preservation, and public safety to ensure that designs safely meet people's

needs. County agencies require a number of partners to improve coordination of the overlap between the built environment and health. TCAT and the ITCTC are critical to planning for and meeting transportation needs throughout the county. The Human Services Coalition (HSC) of Tompkins County is an important partner in its ability to coordinate organizations working in the areas of health and human services in order to identify and meet local service needs. The HSC's Creating Healthy Places program is working to reduce obesity and prevent Type 2 diabetes by changing the environment to increase physical activity and consumption of healthy foods.

Streets and sidewalks are primarily the responsibility of local municipalities. They are also responsible for reviewing new development projects and can ensure that they incorporate healthy design elements.

Additional partners include gerontology experts at Cornell and Ithaca College who help to inform discussions regarding the needs of seniors. The Finger Lakes Independence Center advocates to improve the quality of life for people with disabilities and their families, and works with individuals in need of assistance. Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County provides a number of resources and programs related to health throughout the lifespan, transportation equity, access to healthy foods, and more. Parks, trails, and recreation efforts involve municipalities, the Finger Lakes Trail Conference, the Cayuga Trails Club, Black Diamond Trail Enthusiasts Network, the Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce Foundation, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, landowners, and other interested community members and organizations.

COUNTY ROLE. Health is an important component of County Government activities, with a number of departments filling key roles. The Tompkins County Health and Mental Health Departments assess health needs and concerns within the community, connect individuals with treatment and other types of assistance, and educate community members about physical and mental health issues. The Department of Social Services connects individuals and families with food, mobility, and other assistance needed to maintain their well-being. The Planning Department's data and expertise regarding population trends, land use, housing, the environment, and community facilities, together with the ITCTC's work in mobility and transportation, assists efforts to shape the built environment in ways that encourage healthy living. The Office for the Aging (COFA) and the Youth Services Department provide data and expertise related to the health and well-being of older adults and youth. The Office of Human Rights works to increase awareness and enforcement of civil rights laws, including those pertaining to accommodations of disabilities.

County Actions to be Initiated within Two Years

- Develop a healthy communities strategy as a collaborative effort of County departments.
- Establish a formal role for the County in trail development.
- Prepare and share a sidewalk inventory with municipalities.

¹ Giles-Corti (2004). *Public Open Space and Physical Activity: How Important is Distance, Attractiveness and Size?*