

SAFE ROUTES TO HEALTHY FOOD: STRATEGIES FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

In too many neighborhoods, local stores carry no fresh produce or other healthy options, but getting to healthy foods is dangerous and inconvenient due to unsafe walking conditions and lack of access to public transit or private vehicles.¹ The challenge is two-fold: too few stores sell healthy foods, while transportation to places selling nutritious foods is unsafe, inadequate, or both. This is not an isolated problem. Almost 20 percent of people in the United States experience significant transportation barriers to accessing healthy foods.²

Local governments play an important role in making sure people can safely get to healthy food. This fact sheet outlines the role of local governments in improving walkable, bikeable, transit-accessible healthy food access, a concept known as Safe Routes to Healthy Food. The fact sheet offers examples from cities, towns, and counties across the country, and shares policy solutions that will support communities as they create or strengthen the transportation connections between neighborhoods and grocery stores.

Why Local Government?

In communities across the country, local government leaders recognize that where we live and spend time influences our ability to lead a healthy life. Local governments can play a significant role in creating healthier conditions, taking steps to increase access to nutritious foods and safe opportunities for physical activity, with the longer-term effects of decreasing weight-related chronic disease.

- People living in walkable neighborhoods (where destinations are located within walking distance from residential areas and where street features make it safe and appealing to walk) are more likely to be physically active and less likely to be overweight or obese than those in less walkable neighborhoods.³
- Studies show a positive correlation between access to healthy food retail outlets like supermarkets and better health outcomes, including lower BMI and lower rates of obesity.⁴

Local government approaches to support Safe Routes to Healthy Food fall into specific categories: (1) planning for healthy communities; (2) supporting multimodal mobility; and (3) supporting economic development.



Photo: Janet LaFleur

Create Safe Routes to Healthy Food When Planning for Healthy Communities

A key role of local government is to plan how development, transportation, and investments can help a community achieve its vision for the future. In developing long-range planning documents for communities, local governments have the opportunity and responsibility to envision and plan for a place that lets everyone access physical activity and healthy food. An additional benefit of improving opportunities for residents to walk and bike to access nutritious foods is that it also creates more and safer places for people to engage in recreation and to be physically active for fun.

Local governments of all sizes are recognizing their role in healthy land use planning to improve Safe Routes to Healthy Food:

- In New York City, New York, architects, planners, and public health professionals joined forces to develop Active Design Guidelines.⁵ The goal of the guidelines is to support New Yorkers to achieve daily physical activity as part of a normal day-to-day routing. In order to ensure their implementation, these recommendations were then incorporated into relevant administrative documents, building codes, zoning codes, and subdivision ordinances. Specifically related to improving walkable, bikeable, transit-accessible food access, the Active Design Guidelines include four recommendations:
 - Develop full-service grocery stores within walking distance in all residential neighborhoods.
 - Introduce farmers markets as a complement to grocery stores.
 - Provide safe walking and bicycle paths between densely populated areas and grocery stores and farmers market sites.
 - Design grocery store layouts and parking to accommodate people walking, bicycling, driving, and loading trucks safely and conveniently. Provide infrastructure such as bicycle parking and drinking fountains.
- The New York City Active Design Guidelines inspired the creation of similar documents in Hennepin County, Minnesota and Miami-Dade County, Florida. In Hennepin County, the county lacks land use planning authority, but local governments in the area were interested in making healthy improvements to the built environment. The Health Department convened the Active Living Hennepin County Partnership to develop the Active Living Design Checklist⁶ to guide healthy planning for local governments. It considers how people travel to where they purchase food with the recommendation, "Provide safe walking and bicycle paths between densely populated areas and destinations such as grocery stores and farmers' markets." In Miami-Dade County, through a Partners in Community Health grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Consortium for a Healthier Miami-Dade and Active Design Miami developed design guidelines to ensure South Floridians can easily be physically active throughout the day. Active Design Miami is working with municipalities in South Florida to adopt the Active Design Miami: Design and Policy Strategies for Healthier Communities⁷ locally.
- Through a Plan4Health grant from the American Planning Association, Trenton, New Jersey developed a Health and Food Systems Master Plan Element,⁸ which includes a strategic action to "Improve walking, biking and transit access to healthy food outlets." This action step specifies the roles various city and county agencies have in improving connectivity and suggests concrete actions these agencies can take; for example, "The City of Trenton Department of Housing and Economic Development should conduct a series of "safe routes to food" audits that examine pedestrian, bicycle and public transit access to food outlets in the City that sell healthy food."



Markings on the pavement indicate safe pathways for people walking through this Whole Foods parking lot.

- By collaborating with the Chatham County Health Department on its Community Transformation Grant from the CDC, Siler City, North Carolina (population 7,887) incorporated healthy food access into its Pedestrian Master Plan.⁹ The Health Department conducted a nutrition environment analysis of food retailers in Siler City, and the town's Pedestrian Master Plan prioritized sidewalk and pedestrian improvements that connect residential areas with venues selling healthy food options. This Pedestrian Master Plan has helped Siler City access millions of dollars in transportation funding to improve pedestrian connectivity and safety.
- Philadelphia, Pennsylvania's Greenworks Sustainability Plan¹⁰ includes a goal to "deliver more equitable access to healthy neighborhoods" and includes a target to "bring local food within 10 minutes of 75 percent of residents." One way it has worked to achieve this target is by partnering with Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA), the regional transit agency. SEPTA included a parallel goal in its sustainability plan.¹¹ This has led SEPTA to support transit access to nutritious foods in a number of ways, including:
 - Working with The Food Trust to host farmers markets at transit stops.
 - Extending bus lines to reach new grocery store developments in previously underserved areas.
 - Leasing a parcel of land previously used for staging construction materials to The Enterprise Center for use as an urban farm, The Walnut Hill Farm.

Safe Routes to Healthy Food Are Part of Creating a Strong Multimodal Transportation System

Local governments are increasingly seeing the importance of taking steps to create a transportation network that lets people get around by a variety of modes. Why? In addition to providing residents with choices about how they want to get around, strong multimodal transportation systems offer communities a number of benefits: decreased traffic, better health, improved resilience, better environmental quality, and higher quality of life. For walking, bicycling, and taking public transportation to be viable and reliable alternatives to personal vehicles, jurisdictions must consider both the routes that people travel and the destinations that they travel to. Since all people need to eat, considering how people get to grocery stores, farmers markets, and food pantries is an effective way to promote a strong multimodal transportation system. The good news is that with some vision, it is easy to make Safe Routes to Healthy Food an integrated part of multimodal transportation policy.

Cities, towns, and counties are incorporating healthy food access into multimodal transportation planning in a variety of ways:

- San Francisco, California adopted a Transportation Demand Management (TDM) ordinance that includes a menu of options developers can choose from to reduce automobile dependency.¹² One way that developers can earn points toward their TDM requirement is by promoting walkable or bikeable healthy food access, deemed the “Healthy Food Retail in Underserved Areas” option, which involves providing healthy food options (restaurants, grocery stores) in an area identified as underserved.
- Los Angeles County, California adopted a Bicycle Parking Ordinance that allows “bike parking to be substituted for car parking for up to 20 percent of the total automobile parking required for non-residential uses or up to 30 percent of the auto parking required near Transit Oriented Developments (TODs).”¹³ This can save significant upfront costs associated with developing automobile parking for food retailers, making them both more accessible to people on bike and more economically viable.
- In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the Department of Public Health launched a data collection initiative called Walkable Access to Healthy Food, which maps the location of healthy food venues across the city to identify neighborhoods where people lack healthy food access within a ten-minute walk.¹⁴
- Detroit, Michigan is working to develop “Twenty Minute Neighborhoods,” which consider which aspects of a community should and should not be encountered within a twenty-minute walk. The four criteria include 20 minutes to retail (including grocery stores), transit, and parks, and 20 minutes from blight, defined as blighted buildings, derelict streetscapes, and crumbling infrastructure.¹⁵

Decrease Infrastructure Cost by Supporting Density and Infill Development

The way our communities are designed dictates how we get around them. In settings where places that people need to go are spread out or completely separate from where people live, driving may be the only option. When housing and commercial properties are mixed together or when destinations are clustered together, it makes it easier to walk and bike to reach those places. In rural areas, this may mean driving to a commercial center and then walking around between destinations. Research shows that one of the best ways to encourage people to walk and bicycle for utilitarian purposes is to have places they want and need to go within realistic distances. In addition to supporting active transportation for residents and visitors, there is an economic benefit to local governments to support density and infill development. Rather than spending significant resources to build public infrastructure, such as sewer and water lines, electricity, and roads, local governments can encourage development in places that are already connected to these utilities.¹⁶



Photo: [Michigan Municipal League](#)



Safe Routes to Healthy Food Can Be A Core Element of Creating a Thriving Local Economy

Accessible healthy food retail improves the economic health and well-being of communities and can help revitalize struggling business districts. In addition to providing jobs, healthy food retail also serves as an anchor institution, attracting foot traffic and supporting additional retail investment in an area and ancillary businesses such as pharmacies, banks, and restaurants. Several studies have found that the installation of bicycle infrastructure (including bike lanes and bike parking) may lead to increased commercial activity and sales for local retail outlets, including food stores.¹⁷ In addition, healthy food retail can increase or stabilize home values in nearby neighborhoods, generate local tax revenues, provide workforce training and development, and promote additional spending in the local economy. In order for food businesses to be successful, they must be accessible – both for employees to get to work and for customers to shop there.

Communities around the country are including Safe Routes to Healthy Food in their planning and implementation around economic development:

- As an economic development strategy, Washington, District of Columbia, has pursued transit-oriented development around numerous transit stops. Transit-oriented development in the Columbia Heights neighborhood anchored by a 53,000 square foot Giant supermarket yielded over \$900 million in investment.¹⁸ In addition to easy transit access along the Metro bus and train lines, and good sidewalk connectivity throughout the neighborhood, the Giant grocery store also hosts a Capital Bikeshare dock.
- After Vinton County, Ohio (population 13,048) lost its only grocery store in 2013, residents had to travel more than 10 miles to another county to get fresh produce and groceries. Further compounding the distance challenges, the county seat, McArthur, has a large population of seniors and others for whom access

to transportation and grocery stores is particularly limited. The Vinton County government paid for a market study in order to attract a grocery operator. In addition to a grant and loan package provided to the store operator through Healthy Food for Ohio, a statewide Healthy Food Financing Initiative, the information in the market study successfully enticed Campbell's Market, a family-owned independent retailer with two stores in nearby counties, to open a new store. The 12,000 square-foot store opens fall 2017 and will restore walkable healthy food access to many residents of downtown MacArthur and support the economic health of the community by bringing important jobs. Plans include hiring 15 full-time and 15 part-time employees from the local community, as well as accepting SNAP and WIC food assistance benefits.¹⁹

- Simon's Supermarket in Euclid, Ohio opened in 2017 in a formerly blighted shopping center in the city's lowest income ward, which has low rates of vehicle access and a high concentration of people of color and recent immigrants. Through conducting a Health Impact Assessment (HIA), local government, including the Cuyahoga County Board of Health (CCBH), City of Euclid, Cuyahoga County Planning Commission, and the Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency, identified the need for improved food access and recommended the City of Euclid prioritize the recruitment of a grocery store to the neighborhood. Store owner Simon Hussain stepped up to develop a store in the shopping center, and when he faced unanticipated renovation costs, CCBH connected him to the Healthy Food For Ohio program. The 27,000 square-foot grocery store creates much needed access to fresh food and accepts SNAP and WIC food assistance benefits. Hussain has hired more than 40 employees, predominantly from the neighborhood. Part of what made this site attractive for a grocery store is its proximity to residential neighborhoods within walking distance and its placement along an existing Cleveland Regional Transit Authority line.¹⁹

What's On the Menu for Local Governments? Policies and Strategies to Promote Safe Routes to Healthy Food

This is not an exhaustive list of every action local governments can take to promote walkable, bikeable, transit-accessible healthy food access. There are actions that focus only on bringing healthy foods closer to communities and some that focus only on enhancing safe, convenient walking and bicycling. The Safe Routes to Healthy Food strategies listed below include options that actively consider both the route (how and by which travel mode someone gets from point A to point B) and the destination.

Cities, towns, and counties have a variety of options available to promote walkable, bikeable, transit-accessible food access, including:

- Include health, active transportation, and healthy food access as priorities in long-range plans.
- Update zoning codes to allow for mixed-use, dense, and in-fill development to promote connectivity of destinations and require supportive infrastructure for walking and bicycling, like sidewalks to require safe routes between the network of destinations. Ensure that food retailers are permissible land uses in these zones.
- Adopt Complete Streets policies that consider the mobility needs of people of all ages and abilities. In the implementation section of the policy, use healthy food access as a criterion for project prioritization and funding.
- Develop Active Design Guidelines, including healthy food access considerations, tailored to your community.
- Plan for transit-oriented development that includes food access. Grocery stores make strong anchors for development, especially in underserved neighborhoods. Promote development that is accessible by public transportation by ensuring dense development of the land around existing or planned transit stops.
- Plan for walking paths and bicycle lanes between food retailers and between food retailers and residential neighborhoods. Ensure that the design of food retail parking lots and loading zones take into account the safety of people walking and bicycling to access the store.
- Adopt a Transportation Demand Management Ordinance to require developers to design and construct developments that reduce vehicle miles traveled; tailor to support healthy food access.
- Develop incentives for developments that support people walking, biking, and/or taking public transit. Allow valuable parking reductions for new developments that provide bike parking or are located near public transit routes or along bike master plan routes, as well as to healthy food retailers that provide ample bike and pedestrian accommodations or locate along transit/bike paths.
- Support the creation of Healthy Food Financing Initiatives (HFFI) at the state or local level, which offer grant and/or loan incentives to healthy food retailers interested in opening new or enhancing existing stores in areas that would be “food deserts” were they not to exist. By supporting healthy food retail development in underserved areas, they promote access to healthy food, which supports both the health of residents by making healthy food more available, as well as the economic vitality of the region. And by supporting the creation and preservation of healthy food retail in regions where it doesn't exist, these programs promote healthy food options that are walkable, bikeable and accessible via public transit. Especially in conjunction with strong zoning provisions, new food development can address both healthy food access and opportunities for safe and convenient mobility.
- Prioritize land assembly for healthy food retail development, especially land that is or can become accessible to people without vehicle access.
- Include residents who are most affected by poor food access in official advisory/steering committees to advocate for, shape and help implement solutions for improving access to healthy foods through the ongoing process of planning and decision-making in their communities.

Conclusion

Local governments have many tools at their disposal to improve healthy food access for people who rely on walking, bicycling, or taking public transit to get around. By actively seeking Safe Routes to Healthy Food policy opportunities, local governments can improve health and quality of life, create strong multimodal transportation systems, promote environmental stewardship, and boost their local economy.

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Resources

- [Safe Routes to Healthy Food](#)
- [Mind the Gap: Using Public Transportation to Connect Neighborhoods and Grocery Stores](#)
- [The Wheels on the Bus go to the Grocery Store](#)
- [Healthy Food Access Portal](#)
- [HFFI Impacts: The Nationwide Success of Healthy Food Financing Initiatives](#)

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