

# Transportation Solutions to Create Active, Healthy Counties

## Collaboration for Childhood Obesity Prevention



Issue Brief #1

June 2008

This is the first in a series of issue briefs the National Association of Counties (NACo) is publishing in an effort to engage county officials and key department staff around the issue of childhood obesity prevention. To view other issues in the series, or for additional resources from the National Association of Counties on how to build healthy communities, visit [www.healthycounties.org](http://www.healthycounties.org).

Today, obesity is one of the most urgent health concerns for our children. Nearly one-third of children and teens, more than 23 million, are overweight or obese.<sup>1</sup>

Many factors contribute to childhood obesity, but the community environment a child lives in is particularly important in determining how easy or difficult it is to make healthy choices on a day-to-day basis. Decisions made at the local level regarding transportation, land use planning, health, housing and development, and other important community issues can have a strong influence on children's ability to be physically active and maintain healthy diets. By recognizing these links, and by consciously

making policy and practice decisions aimed to improve the lives of children, counties can help reverse obesity trends and build vibrant communities.

### County Transportation Leaders as Partners in Preventing Childhood Obesity

In response to increases in childhood obesity, counties have begun developing initiatives to help children improve their health. These efforts are most successful when they involve a broad coalition of partners. County transportation leaders, along with other county officials and stakeholders from schools, community organizations, parent groups, faith-based organizations and the private sector, can all be key partners in building healthier communities. Broad coalitions bring a wide range of resources to the table, and provide a variety of access points to reach children and improve their health.

### Why Worry about Childhood Obesity?

In the last 40 years obesity rates have soared for all age groups, increasing more than four times among children ages 6 to 11.<sup>2,3</sup> As a result, children are at higher risk for a host of serious illnesses including type 2 diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, asthma and certain types of cancer. Some experts predict that, unless the childhood obesity epidemic is reversed, the current generation of children may be the first in U.S. history to live sicker and die younger than their parents' generation.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the medical and social consequences, the financial consequences of the obesity epidemic are also significant. Today, more than 75 percent of America's healthcare expenditures are for chronic conditions—many related to obesity.<sup>5</sup> According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the annual cost of obesity in the United States

is estimated at \$117 billion. Approximately \$61 billion is spent on direct medical costs and \$56 billion on indirect costs such as lost productivity.<sup>6</sup> These costs are felt by individual taxpayers, local governments and employers.

### What Can County Transportation Leaders Do?

County transportation leaders can partner in childhood obesity prevention efforts by working to create transportation systems that encourage physical activity. This brief outlines four best practices that counties can implement:

1. Improve safety infrastructure along routes to school;
2. Enhance bicyclist and pedestrian safety;
3. Build bikeways and trails; and
4. Improve public transportation systems.

The ability of counties to adopt these best practices varies depending upon jurisdiction, population size, access to resources and other factors.

### Benefits of Transportation Systems that Promote Physical Activity

The four best practices included in this brief were selected for their ability to promote physical activity and wellness. They also offer a number of economic and environmental benefits including:

- Reduced congestion: Alternative modes of transportation have the potential to ease congestion.<sup>7</sup>
- Increased property values: Studies show that when community design accommodates pedestrians and bicyclists, property values and sales tax revenues increase and vacancy rates decrease.<sup>8</sup>
- Ability to attract a skilled workforce: Skilled workers often prefer to live in bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly communities.<sup>9</sup>



### About NACO's Health Programs

NACO's Health programs are designed to help counties find solutions to the health challenges they face in their communities, including increasing access to care, expansion of rural health systems and advancing programs and policies to prevent childhood obesity. For more information on NACO's Health programs, please contact Christina Rowland at [crowland@naco.org](mailto:crowland@naco.org) or 202.942.4267.

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## Benton County Makes it Safer for Children to Walk, Bike to School

Benton County has a strong history of working to improve school accessibility for pedestrians and bicyclists. In 1980, the county issued a voter-approved bond to pay for the installation of bicycle facilities along commuter routes, including routes to schools. Since 2004, the Health, Public Works, Community Development, Parks and Natural Areas Departments and the Sheriff's Office have worked together through the Benton County Healthy Active Community Environments Program to ensure that Benton County de-

velops in a way that protects residents' health and well-being. Thanks in part to survey work that this coalition did, Benton County communities received a total of \$273,000 in federal grants through the SRTS program to improve safety infrastructure around schools. Benton County has also been a recipient of Oregon State's small grant program for pedestrian and bicyclist facilities.

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## Using Transportation Systems to Support Healthy and Active Lifestyles

### 1. Improve Safety Infrastructure along Routes to School

Walking or bicycling to school is now rare. But this wasn't always the case. In 1969, according to the National Household Travel Survey, approximately 50 percent of children in the United States commuted to school by walking or bicycling.<sup>10</sup> By 2001, only about 15 percent of students traveled to school by walking or bicycling.<sup>11</sup> In addition, when most students get to school they have few opportunities for regular physical activity. Many children, in fact, do not meet the Surgeon General's recommendation of an hour or more of daily activity.<sup>12</sup> In response to these trends, communities across the nation are working to make it easier to walk and bike to school to ensure that young people get the exercise they need to grow into healthy adults.

One major obstacle preventing kids from walking and biking to school is parental concerns about traffic and safety. Parents worry about children traveling along or crossing roads with a high volume of traffic and cars driving at high speeds.

Installing safety infrastructure such as crosswalks, signage, sidewalks and bike lanes creates safer environments for children and alleviates many of parents' fears. Safety infrastructure is most effective in increasing the number of children who walk and bike to school when it is installed within a short distance of schools, and in areas where streets are free of other hazards. County transportation leaders can collaborate with schools, parent groups and others to identify strategic locations for investments. They

can also work with these partners to promote newly created safe routes to school.

Counties can fund safety infrastructure improvements along routes to schools in a variety of ways. Some funding is available from the federal government through its Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program, established in 2005 as part of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU). A few state departments of transportation also provide funding opportunities. In addition, counties can allocate their own transportation dollars, raise special funds through financing tools such as tax measures, and work with local partners such as foundations and transportation authorities to help cover costs.

#### Resources:

- [Federal Highway Administration Safety's Safe Routes to School Web page](#)
- [Safe Routes to School National Partnership](#)
- [National Center for Safe Routes to School Online Guide, Engineering](#)

## Lake County Adds Shoulders to Roads, Increases Bicycle Safety

Lakeshore Drive is a scenic five-mile road in Lake County, Fla. The road links two communities and is popular with bicyclists and walkers. It was slated to receive shoulders in the early 1990s, and although shoulders improve bicyclist safety, residents feared a widened road would result in higher traffic speeds. To address this issue, the Florida Department of Transportation suggested painting the shoulders so that the road would not appear to be wider. In 1996 Lake County

## 2. Enhance Bicyclist and Pedestrian Safety

Getting from place to place on bike or on foot is a great way to burn calories and improve cardiovascular and musculoskeletal health. Recent studies show that walking just 30 minutes a day can lower your risk for many chronic conditions.<sup>13,14</sup> Unfortunately, more than 85 percent of the daily trips American families make are in cars,<sup>15</sup> and one fourth of the daily trips they make are less than a mile.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the potential health benefits of bicycling and walking, families remain concerned about safety and traffic. In 2003, 622 bicyclists and 4,749 pedestrians were killed in motor vehicle crashes in the United States. In addition, an estimated 46,000 bicyclists and 70,000 pedestrians were injured in motor vehicle collisions that same year.<sup>17</sup>

Counties can enable and encourage biking and walking in their communities by ensuring that roads accommodate foot and bike traffic as well as vehicular traffic. Techniques that can be used to do this include: installation of crosswalks; shared roadway signage; roadway lighting improvements; exclusive lanes of traffic set aside for non-motorized use (e.g., bike lanes and sidewalks); roadway narrowing; lane reduction; raised medians; one-way streets; roundabouts; wide curbs and outside lanes; and paved shoulders. These techniques can be implemented by retrofitting existing roads or by incorporating them into the design of new roads.

A lot can be accomplished over the long term by taking small initial steps and planning for the future. Initial steps can include working with community partners to identify streets that, if retrofitted, would result in increased bicyclist and pedestrian use. Small streets in areas with relatively high-population densities are good candidates. County transportation leaders can also work with planners and developers to cre-

Public Works installed three-foot shoulders on Lakeshore Drive and painted them with the same red paint used on tennis courts, which has more friction than regular paint. Follow-up studies showed that bicyclists felt safer with the road shoulders and traffic speeds did not increase. Funding for the project was provided by Lake County.

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ate a vision for future streets to be designed with pedestrians and bicyclists, as well as cars, in mind.

Funding for bicycle and pedestrian safety infrastructure can be included in many SAFETEA-LU programs, and counties can use community development block grant funds for this purpose as well. Check with your state department of transportation to see if they offer funding. Counties can finance their own programs. Foundations, local businesses and community organizations also provide resources.

#### Resources:

- **BIKESAFE**
- *Institution for Traffic Engineers Traffic Calming Web site*
- **PEDSAFE**
- *Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center*
- *USDoT Policy Statement: Integrating Bicycling and Walking into Transportation Infrastructure*

### 3. Build Bikeways and Trails

Research shows that when communities build bikeways and trails, children and families use them and engage in regular physical activities that reduce their risks of developing chronic conditions—such as obesity, heart disease, cancer and diabetes.

Bikeways and trails include roadways that accommodate both non-motorized and motorized users, recreation trails and combinations of the two. Roadways designed for both non-motorized and motorized users (sometimes referred to as “complete streets”) can be created either by retrofitting existing streets or designing new streets using the types of safety measures described in the previous section on enhancing bicycle and pedestrian safety. By allowing bi-

#### Westmoreland County Streamlines Transit Authority Services, Increases Funding and Ridership

In 1978, the private bus companies operating in suburban-rural Westmoreland County were facing route closures due to financial challenges. In order to preserve and expand routes, the Westmoreland County Board of Commissioners combined the existing bus services into a single county entity that was eligible for state and federal funding: the Westmoreland County Transit Authority. Today, the transit authority owns and operates a fleet of over 30 buses, offers 20 routes

#### DuPage County Constructs 282 Miles of Trailway, Paves Way for Bicyclists and Pedestrians

DuPage County, Ill., is creating an impressive bikeway and trails system. This valuable public asset is supported by several legislative actions that have enabled the county to outline priorities for improvements, construct and maintain 282 new trail miles, and direct the construction of sidewalks or pathways where right-of-way is available for non-motorized road users. These actions include the Healthy Roads Initiative, Regional Bike-

cyclists and pedestrians to go the same places drivers go, complete streets connect people to schools, social meeting points and other locations they need to travel to throughout the day, offering a convenient and healthy alternative to driving.

Recreation trails are built primarily with recreation in mind, but they also often connect users to locations such as town centers, metro depots, parks and other trails. Though relatively inexpensive to construct compared to other types of transportation infrastructure, purchasing the land needed to develop bikeways and trails can be expensive. However, if a county does not own all of the land it needs, it can mobilize citizen support, leverage partnerships with local property owners, and collaborate with other levels of government to purchase and set aside land.

Federal funding for bikeways and trails is available through SAFETEA-LU programs, particularly the Transportation Enhancement Program. Funding is also available through federal land agencies such as the National Forest Service, National Park Service and the Bureau of Land Management (trails must be on federal

land), and through Community Development Block Grants. In addition, the federal government supports the transformation of unused railways into recreational trails with its “rail-banking” program. Counties can also allocate their own funding for bikeways and trails, and work with local partners to leverage private resources.

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way Plan, Trail System Improvement Plan, and Trail Maintenance Policy. The DuPage County bikeways and trail system is funded primarily by the county, and also through grants from the U.S. Department of Transportation.

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#### Resources:

- *Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center*
- *Transportation Enhancement Activities*
- *American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials Guide for the Development of Bicycle Facilities*
- *Rails to Trails Conservancy*

### 4. Public Transportation Systems

By their very nature, public transportation systems enable and encourage short walking trips throughout the day. These small trips add up—resulting in calories burned and benefits to overall fitness.

Public transportation systems include bus, rail, ferries, light rail, tram, cable car, monorail, trolleybus, car-sharing and vanpooling. Though most common in urban areas, public transportation can work in any community where the number of potential riders is high, and where locations can be connected to high-use destinations such as workplaces, service providers and schools.

By strategically considering routes, scheduling and stop appeal, counties can attract ridership among children and families. For instance, counties can ensure that routes service schools and malls, that service schedules include before and after-school times, and that stops are safe, aesthetically appealing and easily accessible. Counties can also collaborate with planning of-

officials and developers to ensure that new homes, recreation and retail destinations are serviced by public transportation.

Funding sources are available to help counties improve existing public transportation systems and build new infrastructure. The Federal Transportation Administration (FTA) provides funding for public transportation through a number of grants, including grants for rural transit development. FTA grants are distributed on a formula basis directly to counties, cities and transit authorities in urbanized areas with populations over 50,000. These grants are provided through the New Starts Program which utilizes discretionary grants. The grants are also provided to rural communities through the state departments of transportation. Non-federal grants, loans, public-private partnerships and other revenue sources can also be used to finance public transportation systems.

#### Resources:

- [Federal Transit Authority](#)
- [National Rural Transit Assistance Program](#)
- [Reconnecting America](#)
- [American Public Transportation Association](#)
- [Community Transportation Association of America](#)

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#### About NACo – The Voice of America's Counties

The National Association of Counties (NACo) is the only national organization that represents county governments in the United States. Founded in 1935, NACo provides essential services to the nation's 3,066 counties. NACo advances issues with a unified voice before the federal government, improves the public's understanding of county government, assists counties in finding and sharing innovative solutions through education and research, and provides value-added services to save counties and taxpayers money. For more information about NACo, visit [www.naco.org](http://www.naco.org).

