



THE AMERICAN  
INSTITUTE  
OF ARCHITECTS

# Issue Brief

The American Institute of Architects • Government Advocacy • Current Issue Position and Analysis

## Healthy Community Design

### Key Points:

- ➔ *Physical inactivity and obesity are factors in over 300,000 premature deaths a year. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, over 60 million adults in the U.S. are obese and the percentage of obese children has tripled since 1980.*
- ➔ *A recent nationwide poll taken by Republican and Democratic survey firms indicates that 59 percent of voters agreed with the statement, "If there were enough public transportation options, I would use my car less."*
- ➔ *20 percent of voters believe that improving parks and playgrounds is a hot button issue, while an additional 64 percent believe it is an important concern.*
- ➔ *The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend at least 30 minutes of moderate activity most days of the week, yet 54 percent of U.S. adults do not get the recommended amount of exercise. Good community design and planning helped solve that problem.*

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## Healthy Community Design

### AIA Position

The AIA believes that the design of buildings and communities affects quality of life, economic opportunity and the environment. Recent studies have found that people living in sprawling, poorly designed developments are likely use more energy, walk less and weigh more than people who live in less sprawling communities. The AIA believes government officials can encourage healthy communities that are economically viable and protect the environment by promoting and investing in mixed-use development, smart land use, multi-modal transportation, trails and parks, and by revitalizing existing infrastructure.

### Action Sought

The AIA urges state legislators to craft policy that offers incentives for development and planning that will encourage healthy communities.

### Explanation and Justification

The positive effects of exercise on human health have been well-researched and documented within the last decade. Physical activity lowers the risk of health conditions such as obesity, heart disease, Type II diabetes, and some types of cancer. Public health researchers have started to study the link between the type of community people live in and their activity levels, weight, and health.

Citizens, architects and local elected officials can encourage physical activity by promoting and investing in mixed-use development, smart land use, multi-modal transportation, trails and parks, and by revitalizing older neighborhoods that are already walkable. These elements in the community allow people to mingle in parks and other public spaces, walk to shopping and schools on lively streets, and use public transit instead of constantly battling traffic.

Some cities are promoting walkable communities by using mixed-use development and placing residential, business, and school facilities close together to encourage walking and biking. An example of a mixed-use project is 137-acre Fairview Village, in Fairview, Ore. Fairview amended its development regulations to authorize a special zoning district that allows flexibility in site design and mixed residential and commercial uses. Boulder, Colo., and Santa Monica, Calif., are reducing the space allowed for parking in order to create more attractive, walkable business districts. Blacksburg, Va., protected a pedestrian-friendly historic business district that was vulnerable to commercial redevelopment. The Blacksburg community did not want to lose its small-town character, which caters to bicycle and foot traffic.

Many states have created programs that would foster physical activity. Maine has created a Municipal Investment Trust Fund to provide loans to municipalities to finance downtown revitalization projects. Eligible downtown improvements include projects such as curb upgrades and sidewalks that would enhance walking and biking opportunities. California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, South Carolina, and Texas have passed legislation setting up safe routes to school programs, which aims to improve the safety of students traveling to and from school on foot or by bicycle.

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