

What does a body (and an economy) good?

3 ways to stimulate your economy and your citizens' health

INCREASINGLY, MUNICIPAL LEADERS are implementing healthy eating and active living (HEAL) policies and practices to improve the health and quality of life of the residents of their cities and towns. But while they may recognize the connection to improving the health of their residents, municipal leaders may not be aware that HEAL policies and practices also can help build and sustain the health of the local economy.

Make healthy eating easier and create jobs with grocery stores, community gardens, and urban farms

Strategies that increase access to healthy food and stimulate the local economy include attracting grocery stores to food deserts (areas where people cannot find fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthful foods) and supporting farmers markets and urban agriculture such as community gardens and urban farms.

Grocery stores can stimulate economic growth by creating jobs for community members. The Food Trust in cooperation with PolicyLink report that an estimated “24 new jobs are created for every 10,000 square feet of retail grocery space.”



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Grocery stores also can raise the value of surrounding property and serve as a community “anchor,” attracting additional businesses and increasing pedestrian traffic to a neighborhood.

This increased activity can stimulate the local economy, help revitalize communities, and increase tax revenues for a city or town. In addition, when grocery stores purchase food from local suppliers and farmers, their money stays in the local economy and provides added income for farmers.



Farmers markets provide healthy food retail for city and town residents and, like grocery stores, can create jobs and strengthen local economies.

Local cities and towns can attract grocery stores in underserved areas by creating a package of incentives and assistance for new grocery store development and renovations. For example, a “grocery ambassador” positioned with a city or town’s administrative office can help grocers navigate through the bureaucratic hurdles of opening new stores.

Other assistance includes zoning variances and fast-track permitting for grocery store development; land tax abatement; exemption from sales tax on materials to construct, renovate, or equip facilities; stabilization of building taxes; and the provision of energy efficiency benefits.

On the state level, stakeholders in Virginia are advocating for the creation of the Virginia Grocery Investment Fund to

Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) at farmers markets and local retail outlets. These benefits can have a positive impact on the local economy by increasing the aggregate purchasing power of low-income residents and by boosting retail and farmers market sales.

Urban agriculture such as community gardens and urban farms also can increase access to healthy food for residents and impact a community’s economy. Community gardens can yield between \$500 and \$2,000 worth of produce per family annually which can be particularly helpful for low-income families. Also, it’s a good investment – PolicyLink notes “every \$1 invested in a community garden plot yields around \$6 worth of produce.” In addition, community gardens can increase property values of nearby homes, generating additional property tax revenues for cities and towns.

Urban farms also can create jobs, provide job training (e.g., for people to start their own farm or food businesses) and incubate and attract new businesses. When a city or town creates community gardens and urban farm opportunities in a part of town where there is vacant land or run-down buildings, urban agriculture can serve to revitalize neighborhoods. Also, urban agriculture stimulates the local economy by providing more disposable income for families that eat the food they grow. Disposable income spent locally benefits area businesses.

Some of the ways cities and towns can support urban agriculture are by repurposing public land for agricultural use, adopting supportive zoning laws, maximizing opportunities to incorporate urban agriculture into new development, and encouraging

the use of private land for urban agriculture.

Raise revenue with walkable, bikeable communities

Cities and towns that make it easier for residents to walk or bicycle encourage an active lifestyle but also spur economic growth. Creating compact, mixed-use communities (a mixture of land uses that typically includes residential use combined with civic and commercial uses, including retail, restaurants and offices) that are safe and accessible for pedestrians and bicyclists can increase property values and tax revenues for a city or town.

Studies show that home buyers will pay more for houses that are in more walkable areas or near bike paths. In addition, a nationwide survey found that dense, mixed-use development generates 10 times more tax revenue per acre and saves municipalities an average of 10 percent on police, ambulance, and firefighting services.

Slowing traffic and improving the environment for pedestrians and bicyclists can increase sales in a commercial area due to the increased foot and bicycle traffic. Mixed-used communities that are bike- and pedestrian-friendly, says Smart Growth



Open spaces such as parks and recreation areas can have a positive economic effect on residential property values.

help support local efforts to attract grocery stores to communities in need. The proposed fund is modeled after a public-private partnership in Pennsylvania where a state investment leveraged private capital to provide low-interest loans and grants to encourage the development of healthy food retail.

While the General Assembly did not include funding for the program in their final 2016-2018 budget, advocates are continuing to educate legislators about the Virginia Grocery Investment Fund as a public health, community revitalization, and economic development opportunity.

Farmers markets also provide healthy food retail for city and town residents and, like grocery stores, can create jobs and strengthen local economies. They can foster local entrepreneurs, stimulate the regional farm economy, and preserve agricultural land.

The Farmers Market Coalition estimates that growers who sell locally create 13 full-time jobs per \$1 million revenue earned. Also, for every \$100 spent at a farmers market, an estimated \$62 stays in the local economy. City and town governments can provide cost-free space for farmers markets on city land and aid with branding and advertising.

Cities and towns also can support the use of governmental food benefits such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance

Healthy economy

America, also can attract new businesses that create more jobs and increase revenues for a city or town.

Making it easier for residents to walk or bicycle or take public transportation can save families money if they do not need to own and operate a car. The money saved can be spent on other things, stimulating the local economy. A decrease in commuting costs also can foster transportation equity among low-income residents.

Open spaces such as parks and recreation areas also can have a positive economic effect on residential property values. Many studies show that people will pay more in rent or when purchasing a home if it is near a safe and a well-maintained park. Parks also can stimulate the local economy by increasing tourism.

Cities and towns can create walkable and bikeable communities by adopting complete streets policies. Complete streets are designed to be safe and accessible to all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and transit riders of all ages and abilities. Complete streets principles also can be integrated into a city's or town's comprehensive plan or articulated in bicycle and pedestrian master plans.

Developers can also be required or incentivized to facilitate access to walking and bicycling in their development plans. Cities and towns also can practice transit-oriented development (TOD) – development that includes a mixture of housing, office, retail and/or other amenities integrated into a walkable neighborhood and located within a half-mile of public transportation.

As communities work to become more pedestrian and bicycle friendly and create more “high-value” livable communities, there is a risk of displacing longtime residents (e.g., lower-income and older residents) because of the increase in rents and property taxes. Rising housing prices also make these livable communities unattainable for low- and moderate-income families.

Cities and towns can avoid displacement and ensure that residents of all incomes can benefit from a city's or town's economic growth by adopting policies to preserve and create affordable housing and by including an equity framework into comprehensive plans to provide guidance when city and town improvements affect vulnerable populations (e.g., lower-income, people with disabilities, the elderly).

Reduce costs by encouraging wellness at work

Promoting healthy eating and active living in the municipal workplace through programs, policies, and practices can result in a healthier workforce and provide economic benefits for a city or town government. A healthy workforce can reduce health care costs, lessen absenteeism, increase productivity, and reduce turnover.

According to a Health Policy Snapshot by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, employers studied saved an average of \$6 for every \$1 spent on wellness programs. These programs also reduced sick leave and costs associated with health plans, worker compensation, and disability by 25 percent.

The adoption of policies and practices that require that healthy food options be available at workplace meetings, that



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make water free and accessible to employees, and that would require vending companies to offer healthier food options in municipal vending machines are examples of ways in which cities and towns can promote healthy eating in the workplace. Walking meetings, activity breaks during meetings, and educational campaigns that encourage employees to use the stairs are ways to encourage workers to be active during their work day.

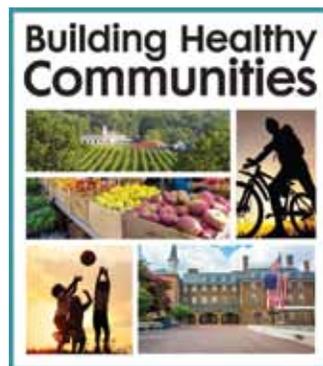
Conclusion

Policies and practices that make healthy eating and active living accessible for residents can boost economic development and growth in cities and towns. Cities and towns, as employers, can also save costs by creating a work environment that provides healthier food options and opportunities to be active.

Efforts to improve the health of a community can also affect the economy by attracting new business. Employers want to locate in livable communities where there is a healthy, productive workforce and where their employees' families can enjoy a good quality of life. Increasingly, they are recognizing the connection between workplace and community wellness efforts and their bottom line. 

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For more information



**VML Annual Conference
October 1-3, 2017**

Learn more about building healthy communities at VML's 2017 annual conference, October 1-3 in Williamsburg. Look for details in the August issue of *Virginia Town & City*.

