Healthy Rural Community Design: A Scorecard for Comprehensive Plans

Version 3.1

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We value your feedback! Please visit https://www.wihealthatlas.org/comprehensive-plans/ to complete a short survey about your experience using the tool so that we can make future versions even better! The web page also has a link to sign up for email updates about new versions of the tool.

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Introduction

The Scorecard

Creating the Healthy Rural Community Design tool

The Healthy Rural Community Design Scorecard was developed as part of the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Obesity Prevention Initiative (OPI). OPI is a collaborative effort between researchers and practitioners to make physical activity and healthy eating more accessible and fun while making the healthy choice the easy choice where people live, learn, work, and play.

The Heathy Rural Community Design Scorecard has been adapted from the Healthy Living and Active Design Scorecard for Comprehensive Plans, developed by Nemours Children's Health System and Cedar Creek Planning and Communications for a broad range of Delaware communities.[1] In order to adapt the Healthy Living and Active Design Scorecard to more specifically suit rural communities, we reviewed the existing published literature and best practice guides on healthy, active design in rural communities and received input from rural planners and public health advocates from across Wisconsin. We also drew heavily from the Environmental Protection Agency's Smart Growth for Rural Communities resources.

About the tool

This scorecard is meant to help rural planners, public health advocates, and community members recognize planning policies, strategies, and visions within their local comprehensive plans that promote healthy living and to identify areas for improvement. The assessment is best completed before a comprehensive plan update, but can also occur at any time as a way to engage stakeholders, build partnerships, and generate ideas for policy, system, and environmental change. The scorecard describes a "gold standard" for planning healthy rural communities; those conducting the evaluation should not be discouraged by low scores, but instead celebrate strengths and select several areas for improvement.

Modeled after the Healthy Living and Active Design Scorecard, the Healthy Rural Community Design Scorecard is organized into three sections. The "Overall plan, vision, and strategy" section assesses whether or not the comprehensive plan explicitly recognizes planning's role in promoting public health and reducing disparities. The "Healthy living" section focuses on goals, objectives, and policies for improving health and is divided into three

subsections: "How we move around and access services," "How we eat and drink," and "How we play and get our exercise." Finally, the "Active design" section pinpoints strategies of rural land use and design that can promote healthy, active living.

Helpful tips and resources

Alongside the assessment items, you will find helpful pointers for scoring your community's comprehensive plan and additional resources and information about specific topic areas. Tips and resources are denoted with corresponding icons:

The **magnifying glass** will appear with definitions of key terms

The **book** will appear with additional information or links to resources

The **caution sign** will appear with tips for scoring

The **thumb tack** will appear with examples of strategies or policies

How do I know if my community is rural?

While there are many ways to classify communities as urban, suburban, or rural, a good baseline is the U.S. Census Bureau's Urbanized Areas. If the majority of your city, village, or town is within an Urban Area or Urban Cluster, it is probably suburban or urban. If it is not, then it is probably rural. However, it is ultimately up to the evaluator to decide whether to use the Healthy Rural Community Design Scorecard, which has language and strategies reflecting the specific strengths and challenges of rural communities, or the Healthy Living and Active Design Scorecard, which was designed for more general use.

Scoring methodology

The Healthy Rural Community Design Scorecard borrows its scoring method from Ricklin et al.'s Comprehensive Plan Evaluation and the Nemours Healthy Living and Active Design Scorecard. Both use the Edwards and Haines plan evaluation framework, in which plans are evaluated for the presence or absence of certain goals and policies and how specific and action-oriented those goals and policies are.

Each item within the assessment tool is given a score of 0, 1, or 2. A 0 is merited if the item is absent from the plan; a 1 is merited if it is present but limited, vague, or weak; and a 2 is merited if it is present, comprehensive, specific, and action-oriented. Furthermore, evaluators can use the guidance provided in the table below to distinguish between a score of 1 and a score of 2.[5]

If an item appears in multiple sections of the plan, this can show a commitment to the idea, but multiple weak statements should not score as a strong statement. Instead, base the score on the strongest statement regarding the item.

1 (Weak statement)	2 (Meets or exceeds expectations)
Item is mentioned, but: • The policy would be difficult to enforce because the statement is **vague, unclear, or confusing** • Statements are listed as **goals, aspirations, suggestions, or recommendations** • There are **loopholes** in the policy that may weaken its enforcement • The policy mentions a **future plan to act**, without specifying a timeline or responsible parties for doing so	The item is mentioned, and it is clear that the policymakers or plan writers are committed to making it happen, evidenced by one or more of the following: • **In-depth analysis** of the issue and related data and/or maps • A **concrete action plan** or strategies for implementation • **Benchmarks** for success and a plan for evaluation • Identified **funding sources** • A **standalone document** devoted to the issue (e.g. a Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan).
Words associated with a weak statement or item include: **may, can, could, should, might, encourage, suggest, urge, some, partial, make an effort, and try**.	Words associated with a strong statement or item include: **shall, will, must, have to, insist, require, all, total, comply, and enforce**.

Plan evaluation process

The best way to score your community's comprehensive plan is to follow these steps:

1. Read through the Healthy Rural Community Design tool several times to become familiar with its sections and items.
2. Read through your community's comprehensive plan, including implementation sections, maps, charts, and appendices. Sometimes comprehensive plans are split into two parts, the first containing background information and the second containing goals, objectives, and policies. Make sure to read both of these parts. When you see information that might pertain to an item in the tool, make a note in the document. We suggest using a PDF reader like Adobe Acrobat Reader or Foxit Reader.
3. Go back and review the notes for each item and score holistically based on what the entire plan says about the item. Be aware that information about an item might appear in different sections of a chapter or even across different chapters.
4. Write scores and notes in the scoresheet found in Appendix A and calculate comprehensiveness and strength scores.

For researchers

As is, this tool is designed for local practitioners to evaluate how well their own comprehensive plan accounts for healthy community design strategies. The tool may also be used by researchers seeking to compare plans or estimate how well regions are planning for health. Such research will be more efficient, valid, and reliable if scoring protocols are used and reliability testing is conducted.

If you would like to use this tool for research purposes, please contact lcharron@wisc.edu for additional materials regarding scoring protocol and reliability testing.

A. Overall plan, vision, and strategy

1	The plan explicitly recognizes the relationship of the built environment to obesity, chronic disease, and/or public health.
	0 Not mentioned
	1 Mentioned in general terms, perhaps with some national or statewide statistics
	2 Mentioned specifically in conjunction with data relevant to the jurisdiction
2	The plan demonstrates collaboration with public health officials, public health advocates, relevant institutions, and/or stakeholder groups.
	0 Not mentioned
	1 Mentions receiving input from these groups via communication or attendance at planning meetings
	2 Details sustained collaboration with these groups and incorporation of their recommendations
3	The plan addresses **health inequities** among populations within its jurisdiction.
	0 Not mentioned
	1 Generally addresses health disparities, underserved populations, and/or **environmental justice** concerns
	2 Specifically, with mapping or other data, demonstrates areas with underserved populations and/or health inequities

Health inequities: Differences in health that are avoidable, unfair, or unjust[6]

Environmental justice: Environmental benefits (for example, parks, clean air) and burdens (for example, unsafe roads, toxic waste) are fairly distributed.[7]

Healthy community design boosts economic growth by:
- Increasing real estate values[8]
- Drawing and retaining a talented workforce[8]
- Increasing the visibility of local businesses[8]
- Enhancing the viability of working lands[9]
- Conserving natural assets[9]
- Encouraging agro- and eco-tourism[9]

4	The plan establishes a relationship between land use decisions and mental health and/or sense of community.
	0 Not mentioned
	1 Mentioned in broad terms, without specific examples or directives
	2 Cites specific examples of how planning for healthy and active living can directly affect mental health or sense of community
5	The plan explicitly recognizes the relationship between healthy community design and economic development.
	0 Not mentioned
	1 Broadly mentions that healthy living infrastructure, design, and/or programming can draw people to rural communities and catalyze economic development
	2 Specifically identifies local or regional economic development opportunities tied to healthy, active design

The Wisconsin Active Communities Alliance found that **the most compelling messaging for investment in active transportation highlights economic benefits**. For key messaging points, check out WACA's one-pager on the active transportation-economic development link.

B1. Healthy living: How we move around and access services

6	The plan includes a goal or objective to increase the number of community members who walk, bike, or take public transit to work and other daily activities.
	0 Not mentioned
	1 Mentioned broadly as a goal
	2 Includes a specific policy goal for increasing mode share for cycling, walking, and/or public transit
7	The plan includes a goal or objective to reduce pedestrian and bicycle traffic injuries.
	0 Not mentioned
	1 Mentioned in aspirational or broad terms
	2 Uses crash data to identify areas of concern and sets specific goals for decreasing injuries

Most states maintain **open-access, searchable databases of transportation-related crash reports**, including location, type of transportation involved (including walking and biking), and injury extent. Wisconsin crash data can be found at the WisTransPortal System. This data can be used by local planners to **identify corridors or intersections that are particularly unsafe** for biking and walking. The Wisconsin Health Atlas will also soon feature Bicycle and Pedestrian Danger Indices for all municipalities, so check back for updates!

8	The plan seeks the development of off-road trails for biking and walking.
	0 Not mentioned
	1 Mentioned broadly as a goal without specific deliverables/metrics
	2 Includes specific goals to create or extend off-road trails that increase connectivity between residential areas and **activity hubs** and/or connect to regional trail systems
9	The plan references a **Complete Streets policy**.
	0 Not mentioned
	1 Mentioned in broad, aspirational, or academic terms
	2 The plan lays out a specific policy goal to incorporate **Complete Streets** principles into the planning process

Scoring help: A standalone bicycle/ pedestrian plan or outdoor recreation plan often contains specific goals for extending trails. If this is the case, this item can score a 2.

Activity hub: A vibrant "town center" where community members can shop, dine, play, learn, meet, access services, and/or worship. Examples include schools, parks and recreation centers, historic downtowns, and commercial centers.[10]

Complete Streets: Streets designed and operated to enable safe access for all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and transit riders of all ages and abilities[11]

Complete Streets policy: A transportation policy that directs planners and engineers to consistently design and construct streets to accommodate all anticipated users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, public transportation users, motorists, and freight vehicles[12]

Examples of strategies for addressing bike/ped network gaps include:
- Context-sensitive roadway design
- Widened, paved shoulders on country roads
- Paths that parallel country roads or provide more direct connections than country roads
- Increased sidewalk coverage
- Limited cul-de-sacs and dead-end roads, or bike/ped connections between them and other roads
- Lower speed limits
- "Share the road" signs
- Bike/ped wayfinding signage

10	The plan includes measures that improve pedestrian and bicyclist mobility and comfort, especially between activity hubs and residential developments.
0	Not mentioned
1	Generally mentions the need for pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure such as sidewalks and trails
2	Identifies key gaps in the pedestrian and bicycle networks and proposes **strategies** for addressing these gaps

Scoring help: A standalone bicycle/pedestrian plan often contains specific strategies for improving pedestrian and bicycle mobility and comfort. If your community has a bicycle/pedestrian plan, this item can score a 2.
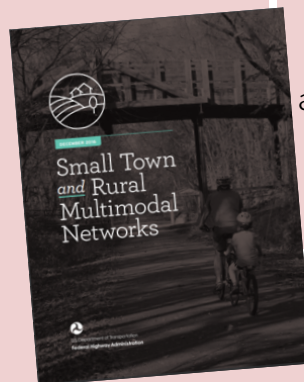
Alta Planning + Design's guide, Small Town and Rural Multimodal Networks, can help you decide which active transportation infrastructure is right for your rural community.

Small Town _and_ Rural Multimodal Networks

Scoring help: Your community might have a transit plan. If this is the case, this item can score a 2.

11	The plan includes strategies to establish or extend public transit services, especially those for the elderly, disabled, or otherwise disadvantaged.
	0 Not mentioned
	1 Mentioned in broad or aspirational terms
	2 Mentions specific strategies, such as public-private partnerships or regional coordination, to establish or extend the reach of public transit

While high-frequency fixed-route systems might not be feasible in rural areas, **plenty of context-sensitive solutions exist**, including[13]:

- Demand-response systems (like dial-a-ride)
- Flexible fixed-route systems
- Rideshare systems or vanpool
- Public taxi
- Circulator systems
- Sharing facilities, equipment, and/or services with regional, metro, or county transit services

Partnerships are vital in making rural public transit work; key partners might include[13]:

- Federal programs
- Metro areas and counties
- Regional planning organizations
- State DOTs
- Nonprofits
- Health & human service agencies
- Schools & universities
- Local businesses & employers

[Putting Transit to Work in Main Street America](#) is a valuable resource for understanding how to make public transportation an option in rural areas. The [National RTAP](#) (Rural Transit Assistance Program) provides information about rural transportation programming and funding.

Safe Routes to School: A national movement aimed at creating safe, convenient, and fun opportunities for children to bicycle and walk to and from schools. [14]

12	The plan supports **"Safe Routes to School"** for children or other mechanisms that support children walking and/or riding bikes to schools.
0	Not mentioned
1	Includes an aspirational goal for more students to walk or bike to school
2	Includes specific **policy and program goals**

Scoring help: Many communities have a standalone Safe Routes to School Plan. If this is the case, this item can score a 2.

Examples of policies and programs to implement SRTS in rural areas include:
- Working with school districts, public safety, transportation, and/or education agencies
- Remote drop-off programs
- Remote pick up programs
- Policies that site schools near residential areas
- Requirements for enhanced walk- and bike-ability near schools

The **Safe Routes to School National Partnership** has great resources for [making SRTS work in rural communities](#)!

13	The plan refers to the latest statewide, regional, and/or county bicycle and pedestrian plan.
	0 Not mentioned
	1 Mentioned in broad terms, without applying specific data or findings
	2 Uses data from the state, regional, or county plan to identify local needs for the improvement of bicycle and pedestrian mobility and safety
14	The plan includes policies to work with relevant state, regional, and/or county agencies to improve access of all community members to health care and wellness services.
	0 Not mentioned
	1 Generally mentions potential partners and/or broad goals for improving access to health care and wellness services
	2 Clearly identifies specific partners and a planned collaboration to improve access to health care
15	The plan requires intergovernmental coordination to connect/share trails, transportation, recreation opportunities, and other services across jurisdictional boundaries.
	0 Not mentioned
	1 Mentioned in aspirational terms without specific goals or incentives
	2 Shows intergovernmental coordination on specific transportation or service provision projects

B2: Healthy living: How we eat and drink

Examples of specific steps communities can take to support community gardens and farmer's markets include:
- Allowing them by right in most zoning categories
- Allowing them in parks and vacant lots and on surplus lands
- Providing mini-grants for their development
- Formally collaborating with Cooperative Extension and other organizations
- Identifying potential sites

16	The plan supports the development of small-scale farming, specialty agriculture, and/or home gardens that grow non-commodity products such as vegetables, herbs, honey, eggs, flowers, and fruits.
	0 Not mentioned
	1 Notes the value of local food and plant production in broad terms, without specific policies or goals
	2 Sets specific policies, goals and/or objectives intended to encourage more local food and plant production
17	The plan supports the creation and sustainability of community gardens.
	0 Not mentioned
	1 Mentioned aspirationally without specific strategies
	2 Takes **specific steps** to support the creation and success of community gardens.
18	The plan addresses the creation and sustainability of farmer's markets.
	0 Not mentioned
	1 Mentioned aspirationally without specific strategies
	2 Takes **specific steps** to support the creation and success of farmer's markets.

| 19	The plan identifies ways to support local and/or regional consumption of locally-produced foods.
	0 Not mentioned
	1 Mentioned aspirationally without specific strategies
	2 Identifies at least one **strategy** for promoting the local foods.

Promoting local foods can improve healthy food access and stimulate rural economies.[15]

The USDA has many programs that support local and regional food systems, including:

•Local Food Promotion Program
•Community Food Projects Competitive Grants
•Farmers' Market Promotion Program
•Farm-to-School Program
•Senior & WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Programs

In addition, the **EPA's Local Foods, Local Places Program** offers funding and other resources for local food promotion in rural communities. The program's [toolkit](#) can help your start promoting local foods in your community.
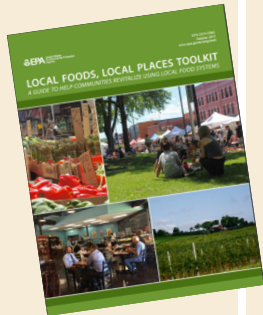
Examples of strategies to promote local foods include:
- Farm-to-school, farm-to-table, or farm-to-institution programs
- Marketing strategies, plans, resources, or programs
- Participation in a regional food policy council
- Participation in a regional food hub

B3: Healthy living: How we play and get our exercise

20	The plan sets goals for access to open space, park, and recreational facilities.
0	Not mentioned
1	Makes aspirational or general statements about the need to improve access to open space, parks, and recreational facilities
2	Identifies where additional facilities are needed and suggests strategies to improve access
21	The plan refers to the latest statewide, regional, and/or county comprehensive outdoor recreation plan.
0	Not mentioned
1	Mentioned in broad terms, without applying specific data or findings
2	Uses data from the regional and/or state plans to define and target recreational assets, opportunities, and needs and set goals and objectives

Scoring help: Many communities have their own comprehensive outdoor recreation plan (CORP). If this is the case in your community, then this item scores a 2 because CORPs are (usually) required to consider recommendations from the SCORP and regional recreation plans.

22	The plan includes standards for cleanliness, safety, and maintenance of parks and recreation facilities.
	0 Not mentioned
	1 Mentions the importance of making parks and recreational areas attractive and safe
	2 Sets standards for the maintenance of parks and recreational facilities
23	The plan establishes standards for developers to provide open space within new developments.
	0 Not mentioned
	1 Encourages developers to provide parks/open space
	2 Requires developers to provide parks/open space
24	The plan identifies school facilities as important recreational resources.
	0 Not mentioned
	1 Mentioned in broad or aspirational terms
	2 Includes strategies to make school facilities available to the community after school hours, potentially including a shared use or recreational use agreement

C: Active design

Examples of policies that encourage growth in designated areas include:

- Removing barriers or creating incentives for mixed-use or higher-density development
- Transfer of development rights
- Expedited development review
- Lower development fees
- Property tax abatements
- Impact fees priced according to distance from designated activity hub
- Impact fees priced according to distance from designated growth area
- Reduced or eliminated minimum lot sizes

25	The plan identifies **activity hubs** such as schools, historic downtowns, parks, or commercial centers and prioritizes economic development in those areas.
	0 Not mentioned
	1 Identifies and designates areas to encourage economic development
	2 Sets **specific policy goals** for encouraging growth in designated areas
26	The plan emphasizes concentrating residential development in designated growth areas.
	0 Not mentioned
	1 Defines designated growth areas within or adjacent to areas already served by existing infrastructure
	2 Defines designated growth areas and sets **specific policy goals** for encouraging growth there

Activity hub: A vibrant "town center" where community members can shop, dine, play, learn, meet, access services, and/or worship. Examples include schools, historic downtowns, parks and recreation centers, and commercial centers.[10]

Examples of strategies to revitalize activity hubs:
- Create a local business improvement district (BID)
- Implement a Main Street Program
- Use form-based codes
- Form partnerships with local businesses
- Identify vacant or historic buildings and rehabilitate them

27	The plan identifies strategies to improve aesthetics of activity hubs to make them centers of pedestrian activity.
0	Not mentioned
1	Mentions a broad, aspirational goal to revitalize aesthetics in commercial centers or historic downtowns
2	Identifies **strategies** for improving aesthetics in activity hubs

28	The plan supports the co-location of **services** in activity hubs, especially in schools.
0	Not mentioned
1	Broadly mentions the benefits of locating community services in existing or new activity hubs
2	Proactively establishes a goal of working with relevant state, regional, or local agencies to locate community services in existing or new activity hubs

Examples of services that could be co-located in activity hubs include senior centers, public libraries, wellness centers, public meeting spaces, government offices.

Scoring help: A standalone bicycle/pedestrian plan often contains specific goals and strategies for improving pedestrian and bicycle safety and convenience. If your community has a bicycle/pedestrian plan, this item can score a 2.

29	The plan includes strategies to make walking and biking safer, more convenient, and more comfortable within activity hubs.
0	Not mentioned
1	Mentions the need for traffic calming and pedestrian/bicyclist features in general terms
2	Identifies **specific design strategie**s for improving pedestrian and bicycle safety and comfort

30	The plan supports infill and the repurposing, adaptation, and reuse of older buildings (brownfields/greyfields) rather than demolition and new construction on greenfields.
0	Not mentioned
1	Mentioned in aspirational terms
2	Sets specific goals for infill and repurposing by identifying targeted areas and/or providing incentives for their development

Examples of design strategies to improve walk- and bike-ability in activity hubs:

- Crosswalks, pedestrian signals, and/or crossing guards
- Traffic-calming measures like medians, narrowed lanes, and/or bump-outs
- Reduced speed limits
- Bike amenities
- "Share the Road" signs
- Pedestrian-oriented streetscape features like planters, lighting, and benches

Examples of farmland preservation policies include:

- Right-to-farm ordinances
- Transfer of development rights (TDR) ordinances
- Required buffers between agricultural operations and residential development
- Lot size minimums in agricultural areas
- Purchase of development rights programs
- Taxing agricultural land at current use value instead of highest real estate market value
- Conservation easement programs

31	The plan calls for rural home clustering (also known as "conservation subdivisions") in which homes are built on smaller lots and open space is set aside for recreation and conservation.
	0 Not mentioned
	1 Mentioned in aspirational or broad terms
	2 Mentions design guidelines, sets specific policy goals, and/or identifies areas particularly appropriate for rural home clustering
32	The plan supports the preservation of existing working farms and other natural resource businesses as preferable to low-density sprawl.
	0 Not mentioned
	1 Generally expresses support for the preservation of farmland and the viability of agriculture or other natural resource businesses
	2 Sets **specific policy goals** for the preservation of working farms and natural resource businesses

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Appendix A: Scoresheet

A. Overall plan, vision, and strategy

		Score	Notes
1	Planning4Health	Score	Notes
2	Collaboration		
3	Inequities		
4	MentalSocial Wellbeing		
5	Economic Development		
	Comprehensiveness subtotal:	**/5**	Total number of items in section that scored a 1 or 2
	Strength subtotal:	**/10**	Sum of scores in section

B1. Healthy Living: How we move around and access services

		Score	Notes
6	BikePed ModeShare	Score	Notes
7	BikePedInjuries		
8	Trails		
9	CompleteStreets		
10	BikePedMobility		
11	Transit		
12	SRTS		
13	BikePedPlan		
14	HealthCareAccess		
15	CoordinateServices		
	Comprehensiveness subtotal:	**/10**	Total number of items in section that scored a 1 or 2
	Strength subtotal:	**/20**	Sum of scores in section

B2. Healthy living: How we eat and drink

		Score	Notes
16	SpecialtyCrops	Score	Notes
17	Community Gardens		
18	Farmers Markets		
19	LocalFoods		

Comprehensiveness subtotal:	**/4**	Total number of items n section that scored a 1 or 2	
Strength subtotal:	**/8**	Sum of scores in section	

B3. Healthy living: How we play and get our exercise

		Score	Notes
20	ParkAccess		
21	SCORP/CORP		
22	Park Maintenance		
23	Developer OpenSpace		
24	SchoolRec Facilities		
	Comprehensiveness subtotal:	**/5**	Total number of items in section that scored a 1 or 2
	Strength subtotal:	**/10**	Sum of scores in section

C. Active design

		Score	Notes
25	ActivityHubs		
26	Infill		
27	Aesthetics		

28	PedFriendly		
29	Co-locate Services		
30	Designated GrowthAreas		
31	RuralHome Clustering		
32	Farmland Preservation		
	Comprehensiveness subtotal:	**/8**	Total number of items in section that scored a 1 or 2
	Strength subtotal:	**/16**	Sum of scores in section

Comprehensiveness total:	**/32**	Sum of comprehensiveness subtotals
Comprehensiveness percentage	**%**	Comprehensiveness total ÷ 32 x 100
Strength total:	**/64**	Sum of strength subtotals
Strength percentage	**%**	Strength total ÷ 64 x 100