



Pathways to a Healthy Decatur

Health is a holistic sense of spiritual, mental, and physical well-being and the absence of illness and disease

- a compilation of definitions of health by community members

Increasingly, more and more studies are demonstrating the link between the built environment and human health. How we live and travel effects not only our physical well-being but our mental, emotional and spiritual state as well. The design of our environment also affects how we connect with each other and how we establish a sense of place and community.

Regular physical activity is proven to benefit people of all ages, having positive effects on self-image, self-esteem, physical and mental wellness, and overall health. Even small increases in activity such as 30 minutes a day of walking and biking can make a dramatic difference in health levels. Additional benefits can be enjoyed just from being out and about in the community – those who are socially engaged have been shown to live longer and are healthier both physically and psychologically.

The creation and support of a healthy and active community is at the heart of the Decatur Community Transportation Plan. For this plan and the City of Decatur, that means establishment of a safe, integrated, transportation system that promotes bicycling and walking as a viable alternative to automobile travel, increased connectivity between neighborhoods and destinations, and equity for users of all ages and abilities.

The transportation system envisioned in the CTP is an environment that promotes the health and vitality of all citizens and visitors. As the focus is fixed squarely on increasing opportunities for non-motorized transportation alternatives, it provides safe and reliable options for everyone to become active participants, both physically and socially, in the community. It is especially beneficial to the City's most vulnerable populations such as low income households, children and older adults, all of who experience differing physical, mental and financial challenges to mobility. This participation not only provides immeasurable benefit to the

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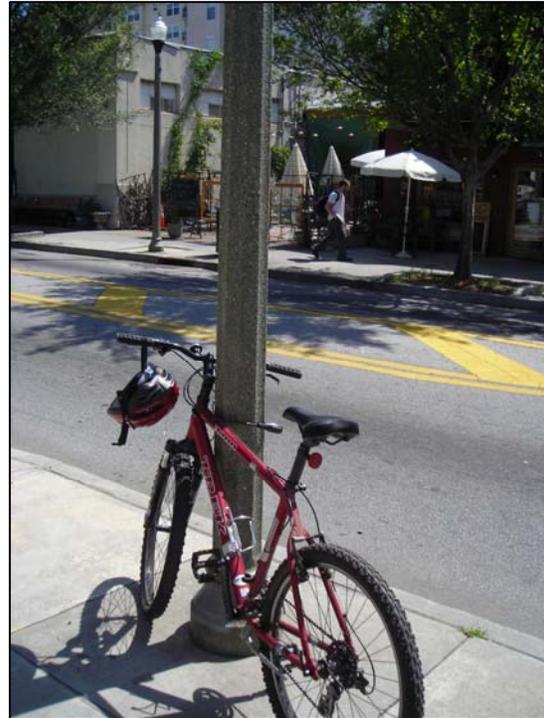


individual, but also to the collective spirit of the City.

Creating Choices

Transportation opportunities determine not only how people move from place to place, but also define the fundamental character of community and enhance the mobility choices and opportunities that are provided. Recognizing this powerful influence on quality of life, the City of Decatur has made a conscious decision to provide choice in its transportation system - choice for increased recreation, mobility and connectivity, and social interaction.

Creating choice involves redefining the street as public space, to be shared by all types of transportation. This new definition requires a new mindset about the distribution of street space and a new language of expression. To that end, the CTP employs a street typology overlay that defines streets by more than just function – moving cars – but also by its relationship to surrounding buildings. By relating the street back to a land use context, a better sense of how people are moving within and between places is gleaned, and facilities are better planned. The street typology overlay is a key tool to aid the City in its evolution into a healthy community.



Guiding Principles, Vision, Goals and Objectives

Four guiding principles shaped the creation of the Community Transportation Plan for the City of Decatur: the promotion of Health, Choice, Community, and Connectivity.

Health

There is a growing recognition that the places where people live, work, learn, and play affect community health. The very houses that we live in, the schools where we learn, the transportation system that we use everyday, and the availability of recreation areas and stores that offer health promoting goods and services are contributors to community health. Based on this realization, the City of Decatur has chosen to define itself as an Active Living community. Active living is about creating healthy communities that have safe and convenient choices for people to walk, bike and be more physically active on a daily routine basis. An Active Living community is designed to provide opportunities for people of all ages and abilities to participate. Active living purports that by building opportunities into communities, physical activity can be easily added into our daily lives without having to find more time in already busy schedules.

In six studies of the relationship between active commuting and health outcomes, researchers found that increased transport-related physical activity is associated with improved lipid profiles (cholesterol), lower body mass index, reduced hypertension rates and lower risks of all-cause mortality. In these studies, active travel also resulted in improve air quality and reduced traffic congestion (Sallis, Frank, Saelens and Kraft 2004).

Furthermore, in an analysis of 50 different studies, researchers have found that, if adjusted for age, education and gender, residents in neighborhoods with physical activity facilities were 20 percent more likely to be active. The presence of pavements (sidewalks) increased the likelihood of physical activity by 29 percent and stores and services within a walkable distance increased the likelihood of being active of 30 percent. And finally, the absence of high traffic volumes increased the likelihood of physical activity by 22 percent (Duncan, Spence and Mummery 2005).

Safe Choices

The City of Decatur has decided to design choice back into its transportation system—choice for increased recreation, mobility and connectivity, and social interaction. Creating choice involves redefining the street as public space so that the road no longer belongs solely to the motorist. To that end, the CTP employs a Complete Streets philosophy that defines the street by more than just its mobility and accessibility functions, but by its role as a critical community character shaper.

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Complete Streets are defined as streets with safe travel facilities for all users – pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and transit riders – of all ages and ability levels. Facilities on a complete street can include sidewalks, bike lanes, wide shoulders, crosswalks, refuge medians, bus pullouts or special bus lanes, raised crosswalks, audible pedestrian signals, and sidewalk bulb-outs, to name just a few of the physical manifestations of complete streets. The philosophy behind Complete Streets is that all modes, and users, are of equal value and should be provided infrastructure for and operational systems to support on a routine basis.

Community

An additional benefit of the Complete Streets approach is that it acknowledges that the transportation system determines not only how people move from place to place, but also defines the fundamental character and identity of a community. It is a part of a community’s everyday life that is reflected in how people get around, where they causally meet other people, where they shop, and how physically active they are.

Connectivity

The City also understands that efficiency in mobility and a high level of connectivity are important as well. A successful transportation system cannot be simply a collection of facilities, but rather an integrated network that connects people to where they want to go, both within the City limits and to the greater metropolitan area.



With these principles in mind, a collective vision for the Community Transportation Plan was developed:

To create a safe and efficient transportation system that promotes the health and mobility of Decatur citizens and visitors, creating better access to businesses and neighborhoods.

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Goals and objectives that support the vision were created. Some were taken from previously planning efforts of the City, such as the 2000 Strategic Plan and 2005 Comprehensive Plan Update. Others were crafted from input heard through the CTP's public outreach efforts.

Goal: Ensure safety for all modes and users of all ages and abilities.

Safety is a prime concern within the City. Traffic speeds and volumes as well as pedestrian crossings and railroad crossings are all important components to protecting all roadway users – pedestrians, cyclists, auto occupants and transit users.

Objectives:

- Provide safe and convenient pedestrian access on all Decatur streets.
- Improve pedestrian facilities at intersections.
- Provide safe and efficient bicycle facilities on appropriate corridors.
- Reduce traffic volume and speed on selected corridors and neighborhood streets.
- Reinforce Safe Routes to School pilot program and improve network connections between residential neighborhoods and city schools; prioritize improvements around school areas.
- Improve traffic operations at intersections to reduce vehicular and non-vehicular incidents.



Goal: Establish a high level of connectivity and efficient movement.

Improved accessibility and mobility within and through Decatur are important to increase connectivity, reduce congestion, encourage new visitors, and help support future growth in the area.

Objectives:

- Develop and promote an integrated transportation system that promotes choice.
- Design innovative and accessible parking options for automobiles and bicycles, and other motorized vehicles.
- Improve linkages between green spaces.
- Improve connections to transit facilities including rail stations and bus stops.
- Identify policy impediments and improvements to encourage alternative forms of transportation.
- Establish a complete streets plan that addresses all aspects of the roadway.
- Improve connections from neighborhoods to downtown center.
- Establish pedestrian and bicycle connections between other key activity centers.



Goal: Promote increased levels of physical activity.

The City has chosen to pursue transportation facilities that support the health of individuals in the community by promoting active living. An active living approach to transportation promotes walking and cycling as modes of transportation by providing safe and attractive transportation facilities and educating individuals about the benefits of healthy living.

Objectives:

- Provide opportunities for safe, convenient, and pleasant bicycle and pedestrian travel throughout all areas of the city.
- Officially encourage walking and biking as pleasant means of travel and recreation embodying physical, environmental, and social benefits for all ages.
- Encourage the use of cycling, walking, and transit as good alternatives to auto travel.

To become an Active Living community that embraces the aforementioned guiding principles, environmental change alone will not be enough. A variety of social- and cultural-norms and individual factors also influence physical activity levels. According to the research to date, environmental factors only explain about 10 percent of the variance in physical activity. Therefore, transportation planning must be part of a careful orchestrated and holistic effort to encourage active lifestyles through education, programming and services. The recommendations provided throughout this planning document seek to accomplish the CTP vision, goals and objectives.



CTP Purpose and Organization

The CTP serves as a guide for decision-makers and other interested parties to transform transportation in Decatur into a system that meets the City's vision, goals and objectives. The CTP is organized in such a way to inform the reader as comprehensively and succinctly as possible. For example, background information and the planning process is described in one section, while recommendations, organized by element are in another. The intent is that an area of interest and information can be located quickly. The following provides more detail on each of the sections.

The Plan is organized into five sections.

Section I: Context presents the environment in which the CTP was created. It provides an overview of the plan detailing the vision, goals and objectives and the guiding principles of Active Living and Compete Streets. It also contains important information about the City, describing it from demographic, social, and geographic perspectives.

Section II: Foundation of Planning houses the body of supporting information and analyses conducted in preparation of the plan. Chapter 4 details the extensive community involvement program conducted as part of the CTP. Chapter 5 highlights the

technical work completed including Latent Demand, Level of Service by Mode, Quality Growth Audit and Street Typology.

Section III: Looking to the Future. Chapter 6 takes a broad and inclusive view at street space and holistically makes recommendations to increase alternative mode facilities. Chapters 7 & 8 look at the pedestrian and bicycle environments, presenting master plans for each. The transit chapter, Chapter 9, examines the transit facilities and suggests how to increase and improve supportive infrastructure. Chapter 10 looks at special issues in Decatur such as a railroad Quiet Zone, traffic calming in neighborhoods, and parking.

Section IV: Implementation presents strategies to implement the Plan including potential funding sources, cost estimates, and marketing strategies. The final Chapter 12 presents information on marketing and an encouragement campaign to complement the infrastructure improvements recommended in the Plan.

Section V: Appendices contains a collection of technical reports to support the technical and public involvement efforts of the CTP.

Next Steps

The CTP provides a vision for what Decatur's transportation system can become over the next decade.

A comprehensive set of policies, programs, and construction projects have been recommended in this Plan, with the intent of creating a healthy community supported by a safe and efficient transportation system that promotes health, access, and connectivity for all residents and visitors. In so doing, quality of life will be enhanced for the individual, the community, and beyond.

A rapid Health Impact Assessment (HIA) was conducted as a unique feature of this Plan which assessed the effects of the CTP's recommendations on the health of individuals and the community at large. The HIA finds that implementation of this Plan will contribute significantly to making Decatur a more active community and thus healthier. Realization of the Plan will contribute to Decatur's high quality of life as citizens embrace physical activity and an increased sense of community. It also states that while walking and bicycling for exercise is beneficial, the Plan will have an even greater impact if it leads citizens to walk and bicycle instead of driving to normal routine places like the store, school, restaurants and work.

With that last statement in mind, success for the Plan will be measured in part in how effectively it alters perceptions of travel and how it new thinking about daily travel routines. The CTP does not seek to replace the car for all trips but to make the user think twice about using the car for every trip. The survey conducted as part of the Plan indicates that over sixty percent of Decatur's citizens support a "Complete Streets" policy, with an equal percentage stating they would be more likely to walk or ride a bicycle for errands or leisure if improved



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facilities were implemented. These results show that the City is already starting with an explicit advantage towards success as the majority of citizens are in agreement with the guiding principles of this plan!

Starting with this strong base of support is a significant advantage for the City. Changing the perceptions of the remaining citizenry, as well as maintaining the interest of those who are already on board, is tied directly to the effort the City extends into implementation of recommended infrastructure improvements and community education techniques. The implementation of this Plan will require effective partnerships among many agencies, jurisdictions and community leaders and will not come without challenges along the way.

For a City with a population of slightly more than 18,000, Decatur provides a high level of service to its citizens. The cost of some of the recommendations in this Plan are within the means afforded by the City, however, most are not. In addition to funding the new projects and programs, the existing transportation system must be maintained. Projects and programs must be prioritized.

Decatur must prioritize scarce public funds and invest in places that will have the most return for the investment, transforming the community and inciting others to do as well. The City is well-versed in leveraging local funds by securing grants from organizations at the regional, state, federal and non-governmental levels. Investing these public funds in high-quality projects can lead to significant private sector investments.

Decatur is positioned within a highly inter-connected region. Trips are made not only to and from Decatur, but through Decatur as well. Because the City's policies, programs and quality of infrastructure have impacts on neighboring jurisdictions and vice versa, Decatur will need to continue a high level of coordination and collaboration with surrounding jurisdictions in order to implement the CTP. This is especially important so that Decatur's vision, goals and objectives become well-known outside the City so that people who work and visit Decatur understand it is a special place.

Making Decatur a special place has been the intent of its City staff, its elected officials, and its resident boards and commissions for quite some time. That's nothing new. In this regard, the Decatur CTP is another chapter in the City's quest to provide the highest quality of life for its citizens. How it differs, is that for the first time, the City has a distinct strategy to affect considerable change in the overall health of its citizens. An opportunity to affect that kind of change is unique and rare, with benefits that are both personal to the individual and far reaching to the community.

