



Pathways to a Healthy Decatur Through the Community Transportation Plan

City of Decatur, Georgia

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Summary
City of Decatur, Georgia
Community Transportation Plan

An increasing amount of studies are demonstrating the link between the built environment and human health. How we live and travel affects 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 community is at the heart of the Decatur Community Transportation Plan (CTP), completed in July of 2007. The recommendations outlined in the Decatur CTP support the City in its vision for a safe, integrated, multi-modal transportation system that promotes bicycling and walking for recreation and as quality alternatives to automobile travel, increased connectivity between neighborhoods and destinations, and equity for users of all ages and abilities.

Utilizing the principles of Active Living and Complete Streets, the Decatur CTP describes creative opportunities to increase connectivity and promote alternative modes of travel such as bicycle, pedestrian and transit. The result is a comprehensive plan that includes a range of strategies from educational programs for users of all modes to the redesign of intersections, the addition of sidewalks, bicycle lanes, and crosswalks. The CTP represents a year long effort holistically examining the City's infrastructure system, challenging the current allocation of roadway space, and developing a series of recommendations that advance Decatur into the current generation of active and healthy cities.

The CTP includes advanced technical studies such as pedestrian and bicycle latent demand and level of service analyses, a Quality Growth Audit to assess existing public policies, and an extensive public involvement program. The plan also includes a groundbreaking Health Impact Assessment workshop that convened health professionals, citizens and community leaders to discuss the effects of the CTP's recommendations from a health perspective. In addition, the City commissioned a public phone survey to gauge Decatur's transportation priorities and support of policies.

The transportation system envisioned through the CTP creates an environment that promotes the health and vitality of all citizens and visitors. As the focus includes increasing opportunities for non-motorized transportation alternatives, it provides safe and reliable carfree options for all to become and stay 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 inclusive participation not only provides immeasurable benefit to the individual, but also to the collective spirit of the City and the Atlanta region as a whole.

Innovation/Creativity

In May 2006, the City of Decatur set out on an ambitious project: develop a comprehensive transportation plan for the City which shifted the emphasis from moving cars to creating a healthy and active built environment, inclusive of pedestrians, bicyclists, and a range of physical abilities. The foundation of the Decatur Community Transportation Plan (CTP) – and it's most innovative element – was precisely that focus on an Active Living community. Starting from the point of prioritizing and promoting physical activity, the planning and engineering elements incorporated a wide range of technical analysis, tools, and strategies that helped integrate both traditional automobile planning as well as elements more important to pedestrians and cyclists.

Creativity was encouraged throughout the process by stating the goal clearly, but leaving implementation up to discussion by the project team. The project team included the city's Planning Director, an Engineering firm, a university research center, and a local planning firm. One example of creative solutions that emerged from the project team was the Active Living event with the 4th and 5th graders. The city had originally planned on hosting a speaker that would address the public at large about the connection between the built environment and public health. However, when the speaker fell through the team saw this as an opportunity to engage children in the planning process, a demographic typically ignored in transportation planning. The event for children included a scavenger hunt that took them all over the city and a presentation on healthy eating and exercise by a racer from the Race Across America Type 1 Team Diabetes team member.

Value Proposition

The Decatur CTP was founded on basic principles that are easily transferable to both other jurisdictions and to future projects within the City itself. The benefits of Active Living extend beyond health to helping support the local economy, promoting dense developments, and protecting the global environment as it promotes a mix of land uses, complete streets for all users and collaboration between residents, local businesses, and City staff. The vision, goals, and recommendations developed through the Plan can easily be adopted by any jurisdiction concerned with Active Living, transportation, public health, and local development.

This plan responded to citizens requesting more facilities for alternative transportation and improved signal timing. It was also an attempt to plan for the future with more downtown housing there is a need to provide alternative transportation so that the current roads do not become more congested with automobiles. The HIA showed that if the recommended improvements are implemented the health of the community will improve. The public involvement events brought different groups together (children, transit-dependent, and the elderly) and connected them to the city in a new way.

Citizen needs were identified through the telephone survey, website survey, and eight different workshops based on a particular topic (pedestrian improvements) or

demographic (transit-dependent). The plan incorporated their comments and created recommendations based on this input.

Building Organizational Capacity

This plan was well funded and had the support of the City Commission. The project team had a high level of autonomy in determining ways to reach the goals outlined in the RFP. The project manager had flexibility to adjust the budget according to the needs of the team. The team was interdisciplinary and met monthly to work on critical problems, like measuring latent demand for bicycling.

Management Philosophy and Culture

A major component of Decatur's Community Transportation plan was developing the technical planning and engineering analysis for measuring the current and future demand for Active Living facilities. The most important tool incorporated was bicycle and pedestrian Levels of Service (LOS) scores, used to measure the quality of existing facilities within the City. The LOS scores developed for bicycles and pedestrians are based on the traditional automobile scoring system from A-F but focus on the quality of facilities for non-motorized transportation, including sidewalk width, buffer from the roadway, surrounding land uses, and quality of the pavement. Bicycle and pedestrian LOS scores have been well founded in research and literature, but have limited implementation in other jurisdictions. They provided valuable foundation for both the technical analysis and public involvement workshops. The analysis also incorporated more traditional LOS scores for automobiles, which helped measure the impact of proposed projects on car and truck travel through the City.

In addition to LOS scores, the Decatur CTP developed Latent Demand Scores (LDS) to help measure the potential demand for new projects. City streets were ranked by their proximity to a wide range of destinations – including schools, shops, offices, and entertainment venues – and the resulting scores helped prioritize streets that offered the most benefit for walkers and cyclists.

The technical scores were combined with a new system of street hierarchy classification to help develop design and construction recommendations that achieved a Complete Streets vision of the City's roads. The Street Typology analysis incorporated street widths, surrounding land uses, and acceptable roadway conditions to help better classify the "purpose" of local streets rather than just their capacity to move automobiles. City streets were relabeled for their need to support the pedestrian environments within the urban core of shops and retail, serve as regional connectors for automobiles, or to help conserve quiet neighborhoods and accommodate surrounding residential areas. These new classifications were paired with suggested design and construction guidelines to help the City achieve streets that meet a wide variety of transportation needs, including supporting bicycle and pedestrian travel throughout the City.

City staff and consultant team expanded the boundaries of the transportation plan to incorporate other critical elements of travel within the City. The Center for Quality Growth and Regional Development (CQGRD) at Georgia Tech utilized two analysis tools – a Quality Growth Audit (QGA) and Health Impact Assessment (HIA) – to help measure the impact of transportation recommendations on development and health within the City. The Quality Growth Audit examined and analyzed the City’s existing development ordinances to highlight areas that were either supportive or incompatible with the Active Living goals of the plan. The QGA helped shed light on areas of policy where the City needed to update to better support future Active Living goals and facilities.

With Active Living as the primary focus of the CTP, the CQGRD utilized a Health Impact Assessment tool to help measure the benefits of proposed recommendations on health within the City. The HIA included a workshop comprised of local and national health officials, academics from the public health field, and local citizens. Representatives from the City of Decatur, DeKalb County, Emory University, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, and local advocacy groups all attended to help analyze the plan and determine the health impacts of proposed recommendations. Health impacts included prevention of chronic diseases and injury, reduction of air and noise pollution, and a wide range of other health impacts. The results of the HIA helped inform the final recommendations and demonstrate the potential effectiveness of the CTP on local health.

As another element of comprehensiveness, the project team examined the City’s parking structures and ordinances to determine the influences and effects of parking within the City, traffic calming in selected neighborhoods and the impact of a railroad quiet zone.

To complement the planning process, the Decatur team incorporated a wide range of public involvement tools to help measure City residents’ concerns and demand for new bicycle, pedestrian, and automobile facilities. The team conducted a series of bicycle and pedestrian workshops that invited local residents to walk or ride around the City and examine and critique existing and potential facilities. The team also held a series of small group meetings with targeted populations such as seniors, Decatur Housing Authority residents, and members of the City’s resident boards and commissions. Most innovative, the team and City staff held a lecture and event for the City’s 4th and 5th grade classes to help educate the children about the benefits of exercise and healthy eating.

In addition to workshops, the team conducted a thorough public phone survey that polled City residents on their general transportation trends and interest in Active Living facilities. The phone survey turned out promising results, with a majority of the City’s residents supporting future innovation in progressive transportation design to support pedestrians, cyclists, and improved public transportation.

Integrated Processes and Reengineering with the Use of Technology

The Decatur Community Transportation Plan integrated New Technology by using new formulas to calculate the latent demand for bicycling and walking as well as formulas for determine the Level of Service for bicycling and walking. The plan also incorporated a new community assessment tool, the Health Impact Assessment. This was the second HIA performed in Georgia.

The Decatur CTP is on the verge of being implemented even before the finalized plan is adopted. The technical analysis for the plan was used to write Transportation Enhancement (TE) grants and generate funding for short term projects. A bike lane plan developed along with the CTP is in the process of being adopted and funded by TE grant with matching bond money from the City. Simple projects such as implementing increased bicycle parking have been considered by City staff and received interest from a range of local businesses. The City has included money in future budgets for hiring a full-time Active Living coordinator to help implement educational and recreation programs associated with the Active Living infrastructure.

The Decatur CTP was developed by a team of expert transportation, planning, and public involvement specialists. Engineering work was conducted by Kimley-Horn & Associates, using nationally-regarded pedestrian and bicycle level of service formulas developed by Sprinkle Consulting. The Georgia Tech Center for Quality Growth and Regional Development utilized innovative and comprehensive tools for measuring the impacts of transportation on public health, local development, and regional sustainability. Project management and public involvement was conducted by Sycamore Consulting, highly regarded for their work in the transportation and public involvement fields. The City of Decatur's management team has won national awards for excellent leadership and model local development. Further, the plan's forward-looking recommendations were vetted continuously with local residents, City politicians, and national leaders in the transportation and public health fields.

Applicable Results and Real World Advice

As discussed above, the Decatur CTP strives to be as comprehensive as possible to elevate the City into the generation of transportation planning. Including traditional transportation concerns such as mobility, safety, and access, the plan also considers the effects of public health, automobile and bicycle parking, local residential and commercial developments, and noise pollution from regional cargo rail lines. The technical track, coupled with an extensive parallel public outreach program utilized cutting-edge tools to comprehensively examine the City's transportation system. City staff and the consulting team considered and evaluated a wide range of recommendations to ensure the guiding principles of Active Living and Complete Streets were closely adhered to and reflected.

There are three primary applications that a local government could take away from this project.

Application 1

Integration of public health information into the transportation planning process

RESULT: A transportation plan that will increase the health of the jurisdiction's population

Application 2

Engagement of sensitive populations in the planning process

RESULT: A transportation plan that recommends and prioritizes improvements taking into consideration all of the city's citizens, especially vulnerable populations like children and the transit-dependent

Application 3

Use of pedestrian and bicycle level of service measures

RESULT: Helps with the implementation of "complete streets" and gives bicyclists and pedestrians a common language with vehicles