

Ann Arbor News “Your World” Submission for 12/25/2006:

In 1995, 44% of Washtenaw County residents were overweight. By 2005, the proportion of overweight individuals had risen to 50%. In addition, only 45% of Washtenaw County residents get 30 minutes of moderate physical activity 5-7 days per week.

In order to address these concerns, Washtenaw County Public Health (WCPH) is collaborating with local planners, academics, healthy eating experts, politicians, and business owners in municipalities to look at how the built environment can affect individual health behavior and outcomes.

For instance, in 1950, the number of grocery stores and restaurants in the county were roughly the same, per capita. Since then, the number of grocery stores has declined by 60% and the number of restaurants has increased by 130%. More people are eating out and it is affecting their health.

With the goal of improving the nutrition environment by increasing the number of places to buy fresh food located within walking distance of homes, not only are people more likely to support local, small scale businesses, they are decreasing their reliance on cars, increasing their physical activity level, and are more likely to eat healthier.

WCPH uses the acronym “FRIENDLY” to demonstrate all of the components needed to make a community more walkable and the benefits of living in this type of setting. Walkable communities have:

“F”acilities for walking, including benches, bathrooms and water,  
“R”outes that connect people to each other and to public transportation,  
“I”nviting design that is interesting and pleasant for people,  
“E”conomic vibrancy, including increased tourism, business activity, foot traffic and visibility,  
“N”oise and fumes limited,  
“D”estinations that are dense and diverse, including farmer’s markets, parks and open spaces,  
“L”ighting, and emergency phones to address safety concerns, and a  
“Y”ield to people design with curb cuts, slow speeds, quality sidewalks and signage.

Research shows that people are more likely to walk if the route is aesthetically pleasing and safe, if there are well-maintained sidewalks, and if there are a variety of destinations to walk to. If local area officials accommodate this desire by structuring their communities around the “FRIENDLY” concept of walkability, Washtenaw County may see an increase in physical activity and a decline in overweight individuals throughout its population. And ultimately, less reliance on cars will help our environment as well.

For more information, please visit [www.ewashtenaw.org](http://www.ewashtenaw.org) or call Washtenaw County Public Health at 734.544.6700.

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