

Case Study:

Built Environment Improvements



RURAL HEALTH
Transformation Center

How a *Blueprint for Action* report accelerated the work in one rural Minnesota community

The Community's Challenge

In 2013, staff from Hearts Beat Back®: The Heart of New Ulm Project (HONU) in rural New Ulm, Minn., saw the “deer-in-the headlights” look from community members when they proposed that the community make changes to the physical or “built” environment to increase physical activity. Community members were confused and wondered, “Why not just offer more programs? Everyone is familiar with them and participation is generally high.”

Staff needed to help community members trust and understand the added value that would be associated with a systems-based approach vs. programming, which can be expensive and time-consuming to offer. Programming also wasn't reaching several key audiences: 1) men, 2) residents in New Ulm's low-income neighborhoods, 3) non-“joiners” and 4) individuals who lacked the time or money to participate.

While the challenge facing New Ulm was clear – how to increase physical activity opportunities for *everyone* – explanations of the benefits of built environment changes simply weren't enough to convince key decision makers.

A new approach was needed. Something the community could visualize and experience.

The *Blueprint for Action* Process

Recognizing the value that an outside expert could provide, HONU contracted with a national transportation consultant for a *Blueprint for Action* report. After hearing a presentation using local examples, the lightbulb went on for community members. Many key decision makers finally began to understand the benefits and cost savings associated with incorporating policy, systems and environmental work into HONU's work.

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Successes

Over a period of five short years, New Ulm accomplished a large number of built environment changes as a result of working through the *Blueprint for Action* process:

- ✓ Adopted a **Complete Streets policy**
- ✓ Installed a **pedestrian crossing island** on a busy street near the elementary and middle schools, recreation center and the health and human services building
- ✓ Developed a **Safe Routes to School plan**
- ✓ Mapped **safe walking and biking routes** and created and distributed maps of the routes
- ✓ Painted **bike sharrows** along seven miles of the biking routes
- ✓ Posted **wayfinding signs** along the school walking routes
- ✓ Painted **enhanced crosswalks** at all schools
- ✓ Installed **curb extensions** at the intersection next to the baseball and football fields
- ✓ Added a **sidewalk and trail** to a new subdivision street
- ✓ Installed a **mini-roundabout** at the intersection leading to the new high school

The *Blueprint for Action* Process, cont.

Experiencing and visualizing change helped community attain better buy-in for the work

1 Identification of assets and barriers

- Tour of the city with a few residents identified community assets as well as barriers to physical activity and documented challenges with photos
- Consultant gave a presentation to a larger group of individuals that provided supporting science for changes; visually depicted barriers alongside examples of improvements from other communities

2 Walk audit through problem areas

- Walk audits provided participants an opportunity to experience challenges firsthand, share concerns, identify opportunities for change, experiment with possible solutions

3 Comprehensive *Blueprint for Action* report

- Consultant provided a *Blueprint for Action* report that highlighted community assets, recommended potential changes in problem areas, offered resources for funding

HONU staff used report and action team model to accelerate community's work to implement changes

4 Formation of community action team

- HONU formed an action team comprised of residents and organizational representatives with an interest and ability to make change happen
- Action team prioritized report recommendations according to 1) ease of implementation, 2) cost, 3) early wins and 4) city's capital improvement plans
- With project staff guidance, team members:
 - Gained confidence and knowledge to work with the city to influence community design
 - Understood their role in making streets safer and more inviting for people who walk and/or bicycle as a form of transportation or recreation

5 Progress updates for entire community

- Annual *Blueprint for Action* report updates and reviews
- A simple fact sheet cites accomplishments, briefly describes changes and identifies continued needs
- Action team identifies additional work and solicits residents' input for future community design

Why the *Blueprint for Action* Worked

The *Blueprint for Action* provided a framework to improve New Ulm's built environment by providing a starting point and a clear path forward. Residents got excited about the opportunities and the process helped them understand they had a role in how their community is designed.

While there is still work to be done to increase safety and calm traffic along many of the streets in New Ulm, a great deal of progress has been made. Many of the remaining projects are large-ticket items that are being incorporated into the city's capital improvement plans as those streets are reconstructed. More residents are getting involved in the decision making process and learning about and promoting the benefits of making changes to the streets.

