

Iowa City, Iowa

Linking Smart Growth Strategies and Active Aging

In the 1989 Academy Award nominated film *Field of Dreams*, John Kinsella asked his son “Is this heaven?” Ray Kinsella answered, “It’s Iowa.” And John replied, “Iowa? I could have sworn it was heaven.”

For walking enthusiasts, bicyclists, and advocates of smart growth, Iowa City, Iowa really might seem like a little bit of heaven. Karen Howard, associate with the city’s Department of Planning and Community Development, explains that for more than 20 years the city’s comprehensive plan has emphasized walkable communities. In addition, in recent years, new zoning and subdivision codes, policies, and regulations have been adopted so that new neighborhoods are just as walkable as the community’s older and more established neighborhoods. Today 95 percent of the city’s streets have sidewalks, and an in-fill program is in place to address areas without sidewalks.

The city also has a policy that requires that new housing developments that receive public funding be built according to basic "universal design" principles so that the homes are more accessible to the elderly and persons with disabilities. In addition, new subdivision codes require street connectivity that will shorten distances residents need to travel to work, school and services. And the city adopted a ‘complete streets policy’, which requires that all new streets be designed to accommodate pedestrians and bicyclists, as well as cars

The city has paid specific attention to supporting more active lifestyles among its fast-growing older adult population. “As we have worked on our district plans, we wanted to assure that we were getting input from all segments of the community,” notes Howard. She comments that there has been a particularly active representation from older residents. Seven percent of the city’s population is aged 65 or older.

“We held community workshops and invited representatives from throughout the city. It was important that we heard from people who could speak to the interests of the various population groups of our community. We wanted to know what gaps existed in services, what services were needed, and what could be improved,” she said.

The city was especially concerned with assuring that older residents could pursue their interests, have a good quality of life, and have access to opportunities to be physically active.

In recognition of its exceptional efforts, the Environmental Protection Agency awarded the City of Iowa City its 2008 Commitment Award for Excellence in Building Healthy Communities for Active Aging. The award honors communities that are planning for, and beginning to use, smart growth and active aging principles. Active aging strives to promote strategies that engage older adults through structured and unstructured opportunities for physical activity.

Working with the Johnson County Livable Community for Successful Aging Policy Board, the city analyzed the community's needs for active aging and responded with a variety of policies and programs to encourage physical activity among older adults. Its research found that walking was the primary activity for 90 percent of those who regularly exercised. Yet many of Iowa City's older adults do not live within walking distance of stores, services, and other needs. The automobile-oriented design of shopping areas outside of downtown do not encourage walking as part of daily activity. So the City has adopted a variety of policies to improve the walking environment.

The Iowa City/Johnson County Senior Center was also recognized for the opportunities it provides senior citizens to pursue and maintain an active lifestyle, including dance, yoga, Tai Chi, and even a drill team that marches in the University of Iowa Homecoming Parade. Credit was also given to the Johnson County Council of Governments for its work to expand the local trail system, thereby promoting a variety of outdoor exercise, including walking, hiking, bicycling, and cross-country skiing.

Howard notes that the Johnson County Council of Governments, representing the broader region, is responsible for transportation planning for the region. Johnson County is composed of 10 cities in addition to Iowa City – Coralville, Lone Tree, Tiffin, Oxford, North Liberty, Shueyville, University Heights, Hills, Swisher, Solon, and a subdivision of West Branch. The COG is addressing transportation links, as well as trail systems, bicycle routes and access to walking trails. “Because the COG coordinates all the communities in our region, these will help assure broader connectivity. The COG is also working on a comprehensive bicycle plan.

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About the Award

2008 Commitment Award for Excellence in Building Healthy Communities for Active Aging

The award honors the communities that are planning for, and beginning to use, smart growth and active aging. Active aging strives to promote strategies that engage older adults through structured and unstructured opportunities for physical activity. Active aging is supported by safe, walkable environments. Smart growth strives to minimize the impact of the built environment on both human health and the natural environment by integrating environmental considerations into development patterns. Using smart growth, communities create attractive, walkable neighborhoods that give people of all ages, income levels, and physical abilities a range of safe, affordable and convenient choices in where to live and how to get around.

For additional information, please visit the EPA’s Aging Initiative Web site at

<http://www.epa.gov/aging/bhc/awards/index.htm>.