Active Living Research Translating Research to Policy Award Recipient

Incorporating Public Health in Long Range Transportation Planning: Implementing research in policy

Shaunna K. Burbidge, PhD
Visiting Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, Brigham Young University
Owner/Principal, Active Planning, Salt Lake City, Utah

The Problem

Lack of physical activity in today's society has many times been attributed to a strong reliance on the automobile for transportation. With only two major freeways and a limited mass transit system, traffic congestion has contributed to long travel distances, reduced travel speeds, and an overall increase in auto dependence by residents of all ages along Utah's Wasatch Front. Over 75.5% of local residents utilize the auto as their sole mode of transportation, leaving only 2.8% of Utah's commuter trips made on foot or by bicycle (1). A study reported by the Utah Department of Health concluded that nearly $393 million per year in direct medical costs could be attributed to the region's physical inactivity. This equates to about $265.37 per capita (2). Planning researchers have begun to address the built environment as a catalyst for or against physical activity, however, the transportation planning process often fails to treat active modes of transportation equally, and rarely if ever plans for active appropriate environments.

The Context

In 2005 the Wasatch Front Regional Council (WFRC-the local MPO) made a decision to change the way they plan for active modes of transportation throughout Utah's most populated corridor. Prior to this process, the Regional Transportation Plan contained only one paragraph regarding active modes such as walking and bicycling. Working with Active Planning, a local firm specializing in active mode research, a technical report was compiled outlining the current state of active modes along the Wasatch Front (3). Recommendations were then crafted by WFRC and Active Planning using feedback on current active living research from a technical advisory committee (composed of local planners), elected officials, bicycle, pedestrian, and public health advocacy groups, and university researchers. This broad coalition of stakeholders came together with the goal of creating a more complete transportation plan for the region.

Working toward Solutions

Based on the material presented in the final version of the technical report, the following nine policy approaches were specifically recommended for inclusion in the Wasatch Front Regional Transportation Plan:

- Require complete street designs which provide for all modes of transportation when building or reconstructing streets.
- Require adequate active links to new transit as well as improved access for existing transit, including safe convenient bike paths and lanes, and pedestrian routes.
- Incorporate bicycle parking and storage in key transit oriented locations.
- Require a four foot (1.25 meters) paved shoulder along new or improved shared roadways to improve the safety and convenience of bicyclists and motorists.

- Designate connected bicycle routes that are distinctly separate from the automobile right of way to serve as arterials for active modes throughout the region. Every effort should be made to designate routes on streets with low traffic volumes.
- Mandate that new sidewalks must provide at least a 3 foot (1 meter) buffer in all urban areas to separate pedestrians from faster moving vehicles such as bikes and automobiles.
- Identify appropriate locations to incorporate shared use paths along rivers, canals, utility right-of-ways, along railroad or freeway corridors, within college campuses, within or between parks and cul-de-sacs, and anywhere else natural barriers exist.
- Incorporate proper signage requirements, as well as specific surface treatments for active infrastructure to define it as separate from the vehicle travel right of way.
- Through the use of the Wasatch Choices 2040 Growth Principles, encourage local communities to adopt active friendly land uses and to plan for active transportation choices in their general plans (4).

In the Fall of 2006, the above recommendations from the technical report were formally adopted by the MPO's Regional Council to be retained as the first "Public Health Component" of any Regional Transportation Plan in the country. Although the Regional Transportation Plan was very recently completed and is currently open for public comment, many local municipalities are already conforming to the new recommendations. Cities that were formerly known as very auto-centric are taking steps toward incorporating more active mode opportunities within their systems with the hope of increasing physical activity levels and promoting a healthy lifestyle.

Lessons Learned

Many stakeholders were initially skeptical of incorporating research recommendations from other jurisdictions, but by evaluating each proposed strategy and reviewing the available literature and analysis results, stakeholders were able to see firsthand the impact that each recommendation could potentially have on physical activity and health in this area. Transportation officials have the unique opportunity to play a role in improving public health by incorporating more active mode choices into their current systems. By following Utah's example in incorporating current knowledge about active mode choice and travel behavior with a concrete plan for improving active infrastructure, MPOs nationwide can raise the bar by providing a truly multi-modal focus in their transportation plans. The technical report and subsequent Public Health Component of the Regional Transportation Plan in Utah can serve as an example for all MPOs nationwide as they take the next step toward incorporating public health and a goal of increased physical activity into their transportation plans.