

# Healthy, Active, & Vibrant Communities Initiative

... working to make the healthy choice the easy choice

## Problem:

Low-income communities in the St. Louis region face greater disparities than the rest of the region in access to both physical activity and healthy eating options. Evidence shows effective promotion of healthy eating and active living requires fostering change to the built environment, policies, and building healthy social networks, though this multi-pronged strategy is not often utilized.

## Background:

Trailnet is a St. Louis based non-profit organization with a 22-year history of promoting active living—a way of life that encourages people to integrate physical activity into their daily routines. Trailnet partners with communities in the St. Louis region to develop bicycle and pedestrian master plans, adopt policies that promote healthy and active lifestyles, provide education and outreach through initiatives like Safe Routes to School, and sponsor bike rides and recreational events.

Prior to 2000, Trailnet focused almost exclusively on creating and connecting a regional trail system and promoting active lifestyles by organizing bicycle rides. Although regional trails are important and highly-used amenities for physical activity, it became clear that more localized, community-scale infrastructure and urban design had the greatest impact on individuals' daily physical activity.

Over time, Trailnet recognized the disparities in access to healthy foods and physical activity throughout the St. Louis region. In particular, Trailnet recognized the limited access to both physical activity and healthy eating options experienced by low-income neighborhoods was disproportionate

to the general population's access. As a strategy for addressing these inequities, Trailnet began building internal expertise by staffing its programs with community development, urban planning, and public health professionals.



*Saturday morning at the De Soto Farmers' Market.*

Trailnet reached out to local active living researchers and soon learned that encouraging healthy eating and active living both require the same multi-pronged strategy—fostering policy and built environment change while building healthy social networks. Trailnet began to build its initiatives on “evidence-based” strategies—methods proven effective through research and in-depth evaluation.

## Solution:

In response, Trailnet developed its Healthy, Active, & Vibrant Communities Initiative (HAVC). The Initiative was launched in 2006 by a two-year grant from the Missouri Foundation for Health (MFH) to work with at-risk communities to reduce obesity rates by fostering policy and built environment change while building healthy social networks. Two years later, Trailnet received a three-year grant from MFH to continue the work in three communities: City of De Soto (Get Healthy De Soto), City of Ferguson (Live Well Ferguson!), Old North St. Louis neighborhood (Forks and Feet Forward Old North!). In 2009, Trailnet received another three-year grant from MFH for HAVC programming in the City of Vinita Park.

### De Soto, Ferguson, Old North St. Louis

While Trailnet follows a “recipe” for working with communities, the communities themselves determine the actions they take. Therefore, Trailnet implements the HAVC Initiative differently in each community based on assets, needs and interests. Trailnet serves as a catalyst, bringing together key decision-makers to collectively address obesity with the goal of initiating efforts that will last well beyond Trailnet’s involvement.

There are three broad components of the HAVC Initiative – community selection, community capacity building,



Rendering of a trail connecting Vineland Elementary school to the campus of the middle and high schools in De Soto, MO.

and technical assistance. Rather than using a competitive process, Trailnet worked with partner agencies to identify and select communities. The selection preference criteria for HAVC contained four broad categories: diverse community representation, city commitment, community readiness, and strategic overlap with other programs affiliated with Trailnet or similar agencies.

Capacity building includes working with communities to conduct formal community readiness and needs assessments; organizing a local task force and developing its brand and identity; presenting best practices to community leadership; bolstering social networks within communities; and providing opportunities for professional development to expand task force members’ knowledge of the multi-faceted nature of encouraging healthy eating and active living. Trailnet hosts an annual convening event, where HAVC communities have an opportunity to present their successes, share lessons-learned from the previous year, network with each other, brainstorm visions for future projects, and learn about additional best practices from expert presenters.

Additionally, Trailnet published the *Healthy, Active & Vibrant Community Toolkit* to serve as a resource for task force members, regional leadership, and outside groups interested in developing their own local efforts. The Toolkit translates healthy eating and active living research into straightforward, actionable recommendations. The Toolkit includes case studies, research highlights, policy recommendations, and resources tailored to eight different audiences.

Trailnet staff presents best practices and provides targeted technical assistance to each task force as they work to implement projects and policies. For example, Trailnet provided model policy language and edited draft statements of Complete Streets Policies to help city staff and elected officials in De Soto and Ferguson. In development and infrastructure projects such as Old North St. Louis’s 14th Street Redevelopment, Trailnet provides technical expertise or seeks to connect community members with experts to ensure walkability and bikeability best practices are considered.

Trailnet also provides technical assistance to projects confronted by technical or bureaucratic hurdles. For example,

staff at Trailnet and members of Get Healthy De Soto met with key staff from the Jefferson County Health Department to encourage the Health Department to permit farmers' markets in Jefferson County. Together they were able to draft rules and regulations to address the Health Department's concerns and ultimately allow for the creation of the De Soto Farmer's Market—the first in Jefferson County, run by Get Healthy De Soto.

## Vinita Park

Trailnet is working with the City of Vinita Park to reconstruct an existing neighborhood-serving trail, establish an Earn-2-Bikes program and engage local employers to promote biking and use of the trail, and provide technical assistance on smart growth policies that can further encourage active living. Vinita Park is a small city with 2000 people working in the community.

HAVC Initiative programming in Vinita Park began in November 2009. Though the Initiative is new there, HAVC programming will function in much the same way in Vinita Park as it has in De Soto, Ferguson, and Old North St. Louis. Vinita Park was deemed ready and was approached for HAVC programming because of its previous relationship with Trailnet; in 2007 Trailnet completed a Bicycle & Pedestrian Master Plan for Vinita Park and the City was eager to implement associated projects. The same strategy of making changes to policies and the built environment while building healthy social networks will be employed, however the programming is focused on encouraging active living.

Capacity building will include developing a brand and identity for the Earn-2-Bikes program; presenting smart growth policies to community leadership; inviting community leaders to Trailnet's annual Convening; establishing social networks through the Earn-2-Bikes program and bike rides; and forming an advisory committee similar to the task forces in the other communities.

## Results:

### Policy, Built Environment, and Social Networks Change

#### Active Living Successes

- Using grant funds from MFH, Trailnet provided financial support for stakeholders in each HAVC community to attend Pro Walk Pro Bike 2008, a national conference that



*Neighborhood children biking along the Charles M. Forrester Trail in Vinita Park. The trail will be reconstructed in 2010.*

promotes bikeable and walkable community design and policy. Trailnet attended the conference with the stakeholders and fostered networking among the attendees. After the conference, all three communities were inspired to create Complete Streets policies in their communities. Trailnet kept the lines of communication open between the three communities by sharing model policy language and strategies for policy adoption. In Fall 2008, De Soto and Ferguson became the first two Missouri municipalities to adopt Complete Streets ordinances. Trailnet is currently working with the City of St. Louis to develop a Complete Streets policy, which will benefit the entire city, including Old North St.

Louis. Trailnet continues to work with De Soto and Ferguson to implement their policies.

- As part of the HAVC Initiative, Trailnet provides each community the opportunity to work with H3 Studio, a planning and design firm, to develop a visual rendering of a desired built environment change. The rendering process helps codify the local vision, focus efforts on a specific feasible project, with the final rendering serving as a tool to build momentum and secure funding for additional planning and implementation. Get Healthy De Soto's rendering focused on the development of a greenway to connect De Soto's two school campuses. Ferguson's rendering will envision the transformation of a major arterial street into a "Complete Street," including a pedestrian crosswalk to connect an elementary school to a nearby neighborhood. Old North St. Louis' rendering project will focus on ideas for bicycle and pedestrian improvements along Branch Street—the neighborhood's sole direct street connector to the Mississippi River and the nearby Riverfront Trail.

- Ferguson sponsored three Ferguson Sunday Parkways events, modeled after Bogotá, Columbia's Ciclovía, in Fall 2009 with attendance ranging from 150 – 450 individuals at each event. The HAVC Initiative provides funding for a biking and/or walking event in De Soto and Old North St. Louis as well; their events will take place in 2010.



*Children at Clay Elementary School tending their school garden.*

- During planning for the 14th Street Redevelopment project and the Jackson Park re-design, the Old North HAVC task force recommended bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly accommodations; many of these are being implemented through construction now underway.

- All three partner communities have committed to partner with Trailnet and Trailnet-hired planning firms to develop bicycle and pedestrian master plans in 2010. The planning process is highly subsidized through federal Transportation Enhancement funds, requiring a 20% local match.

### **Healthy Eating Successes**

- De Soto launched the first farmer's market in Jefferson County in May 2009, with well over the expected number of vendors as well as good attendance. Following this success, farmers are increasing their crops for next year. As part of this process, Trailnet and Get Healthy De Soto worked with the Jefferson County Health Department to change a county policy disallowing farmers' markets.

- In Fall 2009, Ferguson adopted two land-use reforms to support local agriculture: a community garden ordinance and re-zoning of the historic Mueller Farm to create an urban agriculture zone to protect the farm as a viable land-use.

- The Old North St. Louis task force helped Clay Elementary School re-open their school garden in 2009, which had remained untouched for years. The task force continues to build capacity and provide technical assistance to the school's garden leader.

### **Relationships Established with the Public Health Sector**

From the outset, Trailnet sought to design the HAVC Initiative around recognized evidence-based strategies. As part of this effort, Trailnet staff conducted extensive research and built relationships with regional public health experts at St. Louis University and Washington University, as well as national experts. These experts have informed and continue to inform a variety of the elements of the HAVC approach. In addition, as an MFH grantee, Trailnet receives outside

technical assistance on the HAVC Initiative from teams contracted by MFH. The teams are associated with universities and have expertise in dissemination and evaluation. The relationships Trailnet maintains with these various public health professionals and researchers not only support the HAVC efforts, but also help to ensure that the HAVC Initiative successes and lessons-learned become part of the growing evidence-base.

## Replicability

After the HAVC Initiative's third year, it will undergo a full evaluation to assess the model for possible replication. However, an early assessment has shown two main things: the Initiative could have similar reach if implemented in other communities with the organizational infrastructure to support the Initiative, and the overall HAVC approach could be easily adapted and adopted by other communities. The HAVC Initiative's early assessment was conducted through Trailnet's participation in the Early Assessment of Programs and Policies to Prevent Childhood Obesity project, a collaborative effort of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, CDC Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity, CDC Division of Adolescent and School Health, and Macro International.

## Cost:

The HAVC Initiative is primarily funded by foundation grants. To date, the Missouri Foundation for Health (MFH) has been the primary foundation providing funds. In 2005, MFH established their Healthy & Active Communities (H&AC) program to respond to increasing obesity rates in Missouri. Since the program's inception, nearly \$18 million has been distributed to fund 79 projects across Missouri that combat obesity using nationally-recognized, effective and replicable prevention methods including direct programming, built environment, advocacy and policy change. MFH's understanding and support of comprehensive proven methods for promoting healthy eating and active living has been invaluable.

## De Soto, Ferguson, Old North St. Louis

### Primary Funding

The primary funder is MFH. Funds cover salaries, benefits, supplies, conferences, travel, printing, the annual convening, and money for a rendering project and biking and/or walking event for each partner community.

### Supportive Funding

Trailnet staff continues to secure funding to supplement and support HAVC programming. For example, Trailnet was



*Attendees of the 2009 HAVC Annual Convening brainstorm action items for upcoming months in the timeline activity.*

able to secure money from a local foundation to administer a Safe Routes to School program at Clay Elementary School located in the Old North St. Louis task force area. Additionally, HAVC task forces raise money to further support projects. Get Healthy De Soto secures sponsorships to support the De Soto Farmers Market and Live Well Ferguson! secures in-kind and local sponsorships for Sunday Parkways.

### Time

The Initiative began with funding for a 1.15 FTE with a continuing budget for 2.17 FTE beginning in 2008. The staff currently operates at 2.17 FTE according to the following: Community Services Development Director: 10% Ac-

tive Living Program Manager: 100% HAVC Coordinator: 82% HAVC Program Assistant: 12.5%.

Task force members volunteer their personal time. Beyond the 1-2 hours committed to general meetings each month, they easily spend an additional 2-12 hours meeting and working on specific projects.

## Vinita Park

### Primary Funding

There are two funding sources for the three-year project: a grant from St. Louis County Municipal League and a grant from the Missouri Foundation for Health. After the City of Vinita Park secured a grant from the Municipal League for trail reconstruction, Trailnet was able to secure a grant from MFH to leverage additional funds for trail reconstruction and accompanying programming. Funds from the Municipal league cover trail construction costs. Funds from MFH cover a portion of construction costs, consultant costs, a local champion stipend, salaries, benefits, supplies, conferences, travel, printing, and Earn-2-Bikes and community bike ride programming.

### Supportive Funding



*Trailnet leads a team of Chesterfield residents on a walk audit to gather information for the city's Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan.*

Beyond the current three-year grant period, additional funds, though perhaps minimal, will be needed for continued Earn-2-Bikes and community bike ride funding

### Time

The project has funding for 0.8 FTE staffing in years one and two and 0.64 FTE staffing in year three. The general break down of staffing is the following: Community Services Development Director: 15% HAVC Coordinator: 50% Bike/Walk Planner: 5% HAVC Program Assistant: 2%.

Members of the Community Advisory Committee will volunteer their personal time to participate in five meetings per year and any additional hours needed to support the project.

## Websites:

Trailnet: <http://trailnet.org/>

Trailnet's Healthy, Active, & Vibrant Community Toolkit: [http://trailnet.org/HAVC\\_Toolkit.php](http://trailnet.org/HAVC_Toolkit.php)

Trailnet Emerging Intervention Case Study, Center of Excellence for Training and Research Translation: <http://z.pe/OCs>

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