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PUTTING HEALTHY PLANNING INTO PRACTICE

Rogers, Minnesota



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Introduction

Local planning is a process that establishes long-term goals for a community's future and identifies high-level strategies for how to accomplish those goals.¹ Through planning, public officials work with community members, local organizations, and other partners to establish a vision and articulate values for the community's future growth; create a comprehensive plan (comp plan) that describes the vision, values, goals and strategies; and work with local organizations and community members to implement the plan. A community's comp plan is a powerful tool to advance community health.

In Minnesota, state law requires the cities and counties in the seven-county regional metropolitan area where St. Paul and Minneapolis are located (the Twin Cities Metro Area) to have a comp plan and update it every ten years.² Each municipality's comp plan must "contain objectives, policies, standards and programs to guide public and private land use, development, redevelopment and preservation for all lands and waters within the jurisdiction,"³ including a "parks and open space plan describing, designating and scheduling the existing and proposed parks and recreation open spaces within the jurisdiction."⁴ Many Minnesota communities engage in comp planning as a good practice regardless of whether they are required to do so by law.

The 2040 comp plan updates for the Twin Cities Metro Area presented a valuable opportunity for understanding how community health goals can be incorporated into the comp planning process. In 2021, the Minnesota Department of Health's (MDH) Climate and Health Program, MDH's Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP) program, the Twin Cities Metropolitan Council (Met Council), and the Public Health Law Center (the Center) analyzed a sample of 49 Twin Cities Metro Area 2040 comprehensive plans to assess how they addressed several key public health indicators.⁵ This collaborative effort was called the Twin Cities Metro Area Healthy Community Planning Project (2021 Project) and findings are available on the [Center's website](#).

As a follow up to this 2021 project, the Center and MDH SHIP researched how two Minnesota communities applied and implemented some of the public health indicators identified in their comp plans. The goal of this research is to highlight cross-cutting factors to advance health equity that MDH SHIP, the Met Council, and other organizations can directly support through technical assistance.⁶

This report describes three examples of how the City of Rogers put the public health indicators of "Public Recreational Opportunities" and "Greenspace" into practice.

Healthy Planning and Community Study Methodology

The systems and conditions around us, including housing and transportation, racism, isolation, community safety, poverty, as well as our access to education, greenspace, employment, and healthy foods, all shape our opportunities to be healthy.⁷ Healthy planning focuses on policy, systems, and environment (PSE) change to expand opportunities for all people to be healthy.⁸ The 2021 Project created the following framing for health in comp plans:

Health is created in the community by people working together to create positive social, economic, and environmental factors that promote health in everyday life and advance health equity. These include factors like equitable job opportunities, wages, and workforce development, opportunities for civic participation and higher education, freedom from racism and discrimination, and the presence of vibrant and resilient neighborhoods with access to social networks, health care, quality public schools, healthy food options, transportation, and stable and affordable housing.⁹

When done well, local planning benefits all members of the community and helps to reduce underlying inequities experienced by groups within the community. Using this framing, the 2021 Project identified 11 public health indicators that can be addressed through comp planning. Figure 1 lists the 11 indicators.

Figure 1: Health Indicators

Twin Cities Metro Area Healthy Community Planning Project (2021)



For this report, Public Health Law Center staff reviewed Rogers' 2040 comp plan, the City's zoning code, municipal meeting agendas, minutes and public reports, and interviewed City staff. After reviewing these data sources, staff decided to focus on implementation examples related to the indicators of "Greenspace" and "Public Recreational Opportunities." These indicators were chosen because they implicate multiple city services and departments (such as planning, zoning, and parks); present robust opportunities for cross-jurisdictional partnerships

and civic organization engagement; and would produce a variety of implementation examples based on information available about Rogers' planning goals and activities.

To identify relevant implementation examples, staff searched these data sources using terms "greenspace" and "recreation" and conducted visual scans for mentions of plans, projects, and regulations relevant to the two health indicators. Researchers discussed examples identified through this process with City staff to clarify details about the process for implementation and funding sources.

How Rogers is Putting Healthy Planning into Practice

The City of Rogers (Rogers or City) is a rural community located on the ancestral lands of the Dakota people at the edge of Hennepin County, about 25 miles northwest of Minneapolis.¹⁰ The Metropolitan Council's 2040 Regional Development Framework describes Rogers as including Emerging Suburban Edge and Diversified Rural areas.¹¹ Rogers' population is about 14,430 residents.¹² Its population is forecasted to grow by 79% from 2017 to 2040.¹³ The Rogers 2040 comp plan community profile states that in 2016, 94.2% of the residents identified as white, 4.2% as Asian, 1.5% as two or more races, and less than 1% identified as Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander.¹⁴ The number of households with children is increasing; Rogers is home to four schools including two elementary schools, a middle school, and a high school.¹⁵ The City recognizes it will face increasing development pressures and needs to plan ahead for open spaces and shared community parks and recreation services. Because of the links between growing population and expanding community recreation needs, this report focuses on three examples of how Rogers put the health indicators of "Public Recreational Opportunities" and "Greenspace" into practice through community collaboration, local partnership, and preserving greenspace.

Examples Relating to the "Public Recreational Opportunities" Indicator

The health indicator "Public Recreational Opportunities" encompasses planning to support the following factors: overall public access; walkable and bikeable access to parks, greenspace, and trails; culturally appropriate programming; and inclusion of parks and trails in transportation networks.¹⁶ Rogers has 32 parks covering more than 450 acres and 35.9 miles of trails.¹⁷ The Rogers comp plan emphasizes that the City's park system is neighborhood focused with park facilities, natural areas, and open spaces located throughout the City to maximize the number of residents who live near recreational areas.¹⁸ Planning for access to public recreation is a complex process involving city staff and leadership; parks, transportation, and public works departments; community members and organizations; and other governmental bodies including county and regional park systems.



Photo: City of Rogers (Activity Center)

Example: Rogers Activity Center

Community Collaboration and Assessment

In collaboration with community members, youth sports associations and booster clubs, the City opened the Rogers Activity Center in 2007.¹⁹ The Activity Center contains an ice arena and activity room with space for 400 people. Programming and services include youth sports, after-school programs, summer camps, indoor arena walking (accessible via ramps), open skating, and hockey leagues.²⁰ The programs are designed to include residents of varying ages and physical ability levels during all seasons. The comp plan recognizes the importance of civic facilities like the Activity Center to fulfill community recreation needs.²¹

As Rogers has grown, public recreation needs have increased, including the demands on the Rogers Activity Center. As Rogers planned to address the growing demands, it decided to gather community feedback on both Activity Center recreational programmatic needs and how to fund them. To fully and accurately assess residents' recreation needs and their views on funding, City staff wanted input from as many diverse groups as possible.²² In prior community feedback experiences, City staff observed that often, the residents who tended to come to neighborhood or local meetings to share their views came from a limited group. While this input is important, when the same community members show up over time, decisions tend to reflect the perspectives of the few people who were able to attend rather than a true

community-wide perspective. City staff wanted to hear from as many residents as possible to make sure they understood the broader perspective.

With assistance from the University of Minnesota Extension office, the City surveyed its residents regarding park and recreation center investments. To reach a diverse majority of residents, the survey matched phone records with demographic data, and surveyors made multiple attempts to reach residents by phone to assess their recreation needs and funding preferences. The community survey helped Rogers planning and park staff identify what types of projects were most popular with various community groups, and gave residents who don't typically attend city meetings a chance to voice their opinions.²³

Through the survey, the City learned that residents did not support increasing property taxes to fund park projects but were more open to a local sales tax option. In 2018, Rogers' residents voted to approve a local sales tax to fund parks and recreation projects, a portion of which will fund a multi-purpose year-round synthetic turf athletic facility next to the Activity Center that will be used for soccer, baseball, lacrosse, football, walking and exercise.²⁴ Existing property taxes, charges for services, and other donations are also part of the overall parks and recreation funding plan.²⁵ For example, admission to open skating costs \$5 per person,²⁶ and the Rogers Youth Hockey Association and Rogers Royals Face Off Booster Club contribute nearly \$85,000 annually to the Activity Center.²⁷

By taking intentional steps to gather feedback from a broad and diverse array of community members about what types of recreation activities to offer and how to fund them, Rogers gained not only valuable input but also crucial buy-in for a local sales tax to fund its programs. This led to a successful effort to increase funding for the City's parks and recreation projects, supporting increased public recreational opportunities for all.

Example: South Community Park

Local Government Partnership

The growing number of families in Rogers means that there is increasing need for both recreation programs and youth sports, and also for facilities to host them.²⁸ South Community Park is a new park under construction in downtown Rogers. Construction started in August 2023 and is scheduled to finish in fall 2025. When completed, the park will span 40 acres and host two outdoor hockey rinks, four youth-sized ballfields, an open shelter, covered dugouts, batting cages, a multipurpose athletic area, and seasonal pickleball courts.²⁹

Partnership was a critical tool to achieve the building of South Community Park. Rogers partnered with the school district by purchasing land from Rogers Elementary School.³⁰ The City and the

school district share responsibility for the development, maintenance, and operation of the land, and the City will take over park maintenance of new improvements when the park is fully constructed.³¹ One of the project's express goals is to complement existing elementary school facilities with more youth-focused recreational activities.³² Rogers also received support from the Rogers Youth Baseball Association. Like the Activity Center, the South Community Park project is funded through the local sales tax.³³ The partnership with the school district aligns with the goals and vision of Rogers' comp plan, which emphasizes that the "Rogers parks and recreation system ... is intrinsically interconnected with the School District, Community Education and many of the community groups and organizations."³⁴ Currently, some of the athletic fields are used by both community groups and the school district.³⁵ This kind of local governmental partnership in service of public recreational opportunities can minimize duplication of services, maximize funding opportunities, and promote efficient use of land resources.

Example Relating to the "Greenspace" Indicator

The "Greenspace" health indicator encompasses planning to protect environmental features such as wetlands and water bodies, reducing runoff which can lead to flooding, reducing the urban heat island effect, preserving forests and prairies, and promoting opportunities for residents to connect to nature.³⁶ Greenspace has social, economic and environmental benefits that together support community and public health.³⁷ Proximity to greenspace and parks has been associated with reduction in stress and depressive symptoms, with improvements in social connectivity and quality of life, and possible reductions in health disparities.³⁸ In Rogers, a patchwork of wetlands, lakes and streams, floodplains, and undeveloped public and private lands support a diverse ecosystem of greenways.³⁹ The City's Natural Resources Stewardship Plan calls for maintaining a healthy natural ecosystem through community education, local partnership, habitat restoration, and balancing future development and resource protection.⁴⁰

Example: Stieg Woods Park

Preserving Greenspace

A key aspect of ensuring publicly accessible greenspace is protecting open space from development pressures. Under the comp plan, open spaces are those uses which include "natural resource protection or buffer areas, stormwater drainage areas, and preservation of unaltered land in its natural state for environmental or aesthetic purposes."⁴¹ The future Stieg Woods Park is an example of open space preservation.

Stieg Woods is 19.9 acres of untouched old-growth forest, dominated by sugar maples, with bitternut hickory, basswood, ironwood, and red and bur oaks.⁴² Preserving Stieg Woods has



Photo: City of Rogers (Stieg Woods)

been a collaborative effort between the City, a private land owner, a non-profit organization, and a state funding program focused on land acquisition and restoration.

Stieg Woods is part of the Centennial Farm owned by Stieg family members. The farm is facing development pressures, and the planned expansion of County State Aid Highway 117 will also bisect the farm property, exacerbating any current development pressure. Because of these factors, the Stieg family wanted to ensure that the existing old-growth forest would be preserved in perpetuity. To preserve and protect the open space, Rogers purchased 20.8 acres from the Stieg family (including the 19.9 acres of old-growth forest that makes up Stieg Woods). The City is working with the Minnesota Land Trust to determine the best method to preserve Stieg Woods. The City secured a \$1,020,000 Lessard-Sams Open Space Heritage Council grant to fund the purchase and any needed forest restoration.⁴³

Once complete, Stieg Woods Park will contribute to community health and support Rogers' comp plan goal of preserving greenspace for community exploration, natural resource education, forestry service opportunities, and community events.



Lessons Learned

Comp plans play a critical role in setting community-wide public health goals. Although communities can take widely varying approaches to realizing the public health goals in their comp plans, they also can learn from each other about how to fund, coordinate, and work across governments to advance their efforts. Some key lessons and implementation strategies from the Rogers' examples described in this report include:

- The City was deliberate in gathering broad resident input on future investments in and funding for the Rogers Activity Center and other park and recreation projects. The City's community survey efforts, with support from the University of Minnesota Extension, allowed Rogers to reach a wider and more diverse array of community members, and to get a more accurate understanding of community recreation needs and funding preferences.
- The Rogers Activity Center uses a variety of funding streams to support its programs, tailoring programming to meet the needs of all ages and ability levels.
- By working with the school district to develop the South Community Park, Rogers was able to engage multiple stakeholders and leverage existing resources to meet a community need.
- Land acquisition is a critical tool in greenspace preservation. Through partnering with a private landowner, utilizing outside resources, and securing state funding, Rogers put its greenspace preservation goals into practice.

Conclusion

Local planning that advances public health helps to reduce underlying inequities experienced by some groups within a community while providing positive benefits for all community members. The 2021 Project examined cross-cutting health indicators in comp plans that advance health equity. Putting those indicators into practice can take different paths — from coordinating with other city planning efforts such as neighborhood master planning, or collaborating with neighboring communities and agencies — to requiring preservation through regulations like zoning and subdivision provisions. Whatever implementation path a community takes, every path presents opportunities to communicate and coordinate with community members in ways that will advance comp plan health equity goals more efficiently and effectively.

Additional Resources

The following resources have helpful information relating to healthy municipal planning:

- [*Healthy Communities Policy Guide*](#) (2017), American Planning Association⁴⁴
- [*Handbook for Minnesota Cities Chapter 13: Comprehensive Planning, Land Use and City Owned Land*](#) (2023), League of Minnesota Cities⁴⁵
- [*Smart Growth and Open Space Conservation*](#) (last updated 2023) — resource hub from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for technical assistance in planning for equitable access to natural assets⁴⁶
- [*Thrive MSP 2040*](#) — the Twin Cities metropolitan vision for the next 30 years from the Metropolitan Council⁴⁷
- [*Land Use and Community Design*](#) — CDC resource hub on community-health centered planning and design⁴⁸
- [*Toolkit to Integrate Health and Equity into Comprehensive Plans — Using the Sustaining Places-Best Practices for Comprehensive Plans Framework*](#) (2020), American Planning Association⁴⁹
- [*Rural, Urban and Regional Planning*](#) — Public Health Law Center resource hub⁵⁰

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We collaborate with others to reduce and eliminate commercial tobacco, promote healthy food, support physical activity, pursue climate justice, and address other causes of chronic disease. We partner with Tribal health leaders, federal agencies, national health advocacy organizations, state and local governments, planners, researchers, attorneys, community coalitions, and individuals working on public health issues to create healthier communities around the country.

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