

## UNIQUE PARTNERSHIPS:

# Advancing healthy, active living in Austin, Texas

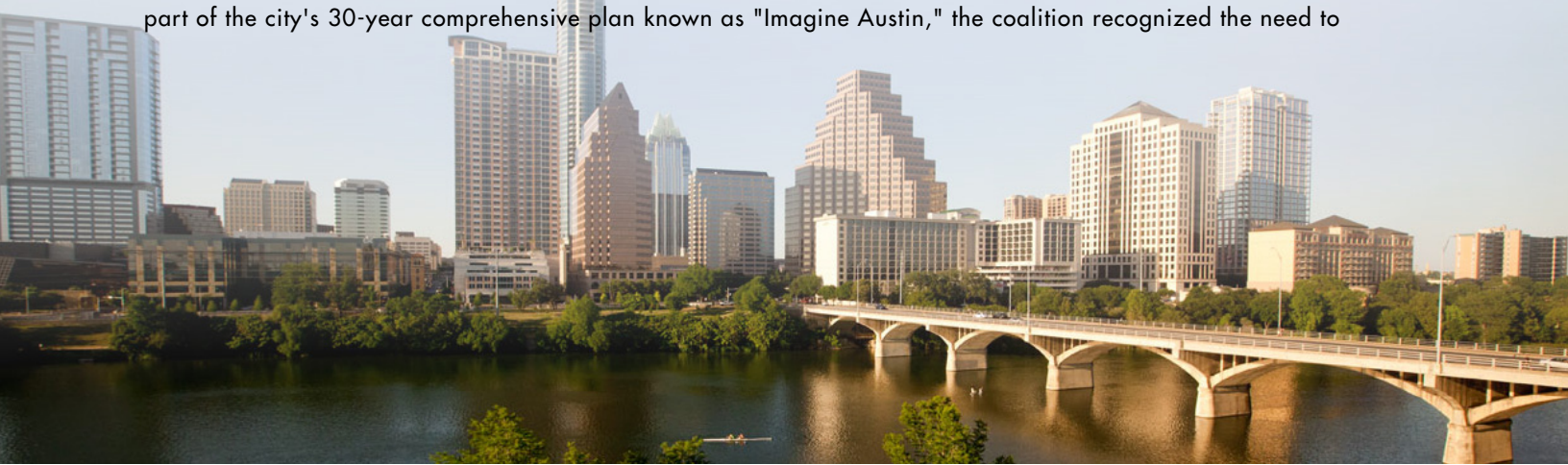
Environmental health professionals are working across sectors to ensure healthy communities for all. In understanding the decisions made upstream impact communities downstream, partnerships become key to lessening or improving the negative health impacts of our natural and built environments. Through these partnerships, environmental health professionals are able to integrate health and equity considerations in the planning and decision-making process to achieve healthier environments for all.



Within the health and planning sectors, there is a growing movement to collaborate to advance healthy community design and health equity and to integrate health considerations into planning and policy decisions. In Austin, Texas, officials recognized the benefits of cross-sector collaboration and the need to grow and sustain existing partnerships among transportation, health and human services, and planning and zoning agencies, eventually gaining additional support through the Plan4Health project. Plan4Health, a partnership between the American Public Health Association and the American Planning Association, is a program that encourages local APA chapters, APHA affiliates, and health and non-traditional health partners to form local coalitions to improve population health and reduce chronic disease risks through healthy planning.

Happily, Austin received funds to create the Austin Plan4Health Pilot Program and advance its work to increase physical activity and improve access to nutritious foods. The Austin Plan4Health coalition not only included the city's Planning and Zoning and Health and Human Services Departments, but also local partners such as the Office of Sustainability, Transportation Department, Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the Texas APA chapter and Texas Public Health Association. Once the coalition was formed, partners created a shared vision for increasing physical activity and improving access to nutritious, local foods using best practices in district food planning and travel training programs.

The Austin Plan4Health coalition is focusing its efforts in North-Central Austin, which serves more than 21,000 residents, 68 percent of which identify as Hispanic or Latino. North-Central Austin community residents typically face less access to fresh, healthy and affordable foods, fewer transportation options and greater economic barriers than many other communities in Austin. Additionally, North-Central Austin is characterized by significant health disparities and a high burden of chronic diseases. Through a community health assessment conducted in 2012 as part of the city's 30-year comprehensive plan known as "Imagine Austin," the coalition recognized the need to



increase physical activity rates and access to nutritious foods. Over the past year, the coalition has engaged more than 65 local organizations and conducted extensive outreach to engage community members in making North-Central Austin a healthier place.

As part of its efforts, the coalition launched the state's first transportation options program, which provides active transportation resources —such as walking maps, bus passes and safety lights — to residents in an effort to encourage physical activity. A series of instructional transit, walking and bicycling programs designed to reach special populations, such as refugee families, residents of various cultural backgrounds and neighborhood associations, were also offered. To reach a representative population of the community, the coalition arranged for translation services in both Spanish and Vietnamese for their asset-based community outreach events. Through these efforts, Austin Plan4Health learned that a lack of supportive infrastructure for active living, such as sidewalks and bike lanes, made it quite difficult for residents to be physically active and choose active transportation options. The coalition quickly recognized that transportation and planning decisions as well as infrastructure were shaping travel behaviors and ultimately, related health outcomes.

In response, the city began implementing short-term improvements, such as sidewalks, buffered bicycle lanes and shared lane markings. Through parallel efforts to create a pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly Austin, the city dedicated \$1.9 million to transportation safety improvements. Many of the transportation safety improvements implemented in the North-Central Austin area will come directly from suggestions made by community members. In gathering and considering community input, the resulting infrastructure improvements will be more likely to meet community needs and gain buy-in from residents.



## Learning how to get around with Smart Trips Austin

Austin Plan4Health wants to create a healthy, active community for North-Central Austin residents. Concerned with the high inactivity rates and high percentage of personal automobile use in the area, the coalition piloted the Smart Trips Austin program. With goals of increasing the current 1 percent bicycling rate, 1.6 percent walking rate and 7.2 percent public transit rate as well as decreasing the 87 percent use of personal automobiles for trips, Smart Trips Austin provides North-Central Austin residents with tools for successfully riding public transit, walking and biking in their neighborhoods. This could not have come at a better time, as Capital Metro, Austin's regional public transit provider, recently implemented community-driven service changes in North-Central Austin to make the system more accessible.

Smart Trips Austin offers tools such as the "Pedestrian Guide" and "Austin By Bike" classes in both English and Spanish. Residents also have the opportunity to participate in a Smart Trips Transit Adventure to learn how to navigate the city's public transit system. In fact, the city's Active Transportation Division staff recently conducted a Smart Trips Transit Adventure with residents on a Saturday morning that included navigating the city's bus system to reach a local festival area. Meeting at a pre-specified bus stop, residents learned how to ride the bus, read a transit map, plan a trip, load a bike on the bus and how to signal the bus to stop. Once they arrived at the festival, everyone agreed to meet at the same location at a specified time to take the bus back home. Smart Trips Transit Adventure offers a fun way to get to know the public transit system and provides residents with the tools to increase their public transit use.

In addition, the city's active transportation staff encouraged residents to stay involved with the public transit system by providing feedback to Connections 2025, Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority's five-year plan for growth and development of the public transit system. As a result of Smart Trips Austin's success in North-Central Austin, the effort will expand to Central Austin in spring 2016. The public transit pilot is one of many ways that Austin Plan4Health encourages North-Central Austin residents to live healthy, active lifestyles.

**Learn more about Smart Trips Austin:** <http://austintexas.gov/page/smarttrips>

Austin Plan4Health also addresses the lack of access to healthy food options through neighborhood food systems planning, which follows food from farm to fork. The coalition engages local partners, such as businesses, grocery stores, nonprofits, faith-based organizations and neighborhood associations, to develop neighborhood-scale strategies that will ultimately create a sustainable local food system that supports the local economy, improves public health, and reduces the negative health and safety impacts of transportation. The coalition works with stakeholders to map areas with fresh produce, food assistance, food pantries, and barriers to healthy food access. The coalition also is in the process of conducting interviews and focus groups with community members in partnership with the University of Texas Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs to gain insight on opportunities and barriers related to healthy, local food access.



The coalition plans to use information gained through community interviews, focus groups and mapping efforts to create a food systems toolkit that supports affordable, fresh food access and reduces food waste for North-Central Austin. The toolkit may touch on topics such as new community gardens, new food hubs for food distribution, food waste recovery options, and training to promote healthy purchasing within stores. Additionally, the coalition has collected input from community residents about the underlying challenges of improving access to healthy foods. The coalition hopes to provide policy recommendations to address these challenges in the toolkit as well.

Austin Plan4Health continues to engage with the community and organizational partners to ensure that the coalition's vision reflects that of the community. Ideally, North-Central Austin will become a place that fosters physical activity and improves access to nutritious foods through growing and sustaining a collective vision that is driven by community needs and input. In the future, the coalition hopes to expand its reach to new neighborhoods and create a citywide Neighborhood Food System Planning process. With this work and continual cross-sector collaboration, Austin Plan4Health will continue to create healthy communities for all.

**Learn more about Austin Plan4Health:** <http://www.plan4health.us/plan4health-coalitions/austin-tx-city-of-austin/>

