



Safe Routes  
to School  
**National  
Partnership**

## Safe Routes to Healthy Food: Recommendations for Regional Planning Organizations



No one should have to risk their life walking alongside fast moving traffic or spend two hours on the bus just to get to the grocery store. Yet this is the reality for too many people in the United States, and particularly affects people burdened by other challenges, like low income, lack of vehicle access, and unsafe streets. By working toward Safe Routes to Healthy Food, regions can improve safety and convenience for people walking, biking, and taking public transit to get nutritious foods. This fact sheet is intended to help active transportation and healthy food advocates understand why and how to engage regional planning agencies to improve Safe Routes to Healthy Food.

### **Want to Learn More About Safe Routes to Healthy Food?**

Safe Routes to Healthy Food focuses on overcoming the transportation challenges to getting healthy food. Not everyone has a car, and many people rely on walking, bicycling, or public transportation to access food. Everyone deserves a transportation system that can conveniently, safely, and affordably link them to the places they need to go, especially to healthy food. For more information: <https://www.saferoutespartnership.org/resources/publications/healthy-food>



## Why Regional Planning Organizations Should Work to Improve Safe Routes to Healthy Food

People travel fluidly across city boundaries. Food travels miles before reaching our grocery bags, and even further to reach our dinner plates. Not everyone shops in the city they live in. Planning happens at the regional level to support the goal of seamless mobility of people and goods. Without coordination across jurisdictional lines, it would be more difficult to take a bus from the suburbs to the city or for strong regional food systems to exist. Regional planning agencies, like metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), work across sectors to build strong regional economies where people are easily able to get around on foot, on bike, by car, or on public transit. As such, they have a unique role to play in improving healthy food access.

### What Are Regional Planning Organizations?

Different kinds of regional planning organizations exist. Key examples include:

- Metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) are federally mandated entities tasked with transportation planning in urbanized areas of over 50,000 population. MPOs develop policies for federal transportation spending and administer federal transportation dollars in urbanized areas with 200,000 people or more.
- Rural transportation planning organizations (RTPOs) support state departments of transportation with rural transportation planning.
- Councils of government (COGs) are agencies whose members are most or all of the local governments in a region. A COG enables cities, towns, and counties to work together to plan across a region. COGs and MPOs are sometimes co-located or function as a combined entity to coordinate planning for a region.

## How to Influence Decisionmakers at Regional Planning Agencies

Decisionmakers at regional planning agencies often include both elected officials and professional staff. That means that it is possible to influence decisions made within these agencies by working with communities with elected leaders that sit on these agencies' boards and working directly with the agency's professional staff. Assess who within your organization or coalition would be best positioned to work with each type of decisionmaker. Perhaps one of your elected officials sits on the board of the local metropolitan planning organization. Schedule a meeting with this local elected official to discuss your suggestions to improve walking, biking, and public transit access to healthy foods. As a planner or transportation professional, you may choose to connect with professional staff at the organization to make the case for Safe Routes to Healthy Foods. Both paths can be effective.

Another avenue for influencing regional planning agencies is through community involvement. Regional planning agencies often engage advisory boards to help shape their plans and priorities. For example, such agencies may have bicycle and pedestrian advisory committees or equity advisory committees, which can shape the development and prioritization of projects and plans to reflect equitable bike and pedestrian priorities. Equitable bicycle and pedestrian priorities include investing in transportation improvements in communities lacking sidewalks, bike lanes, and walkable environments; planning for third shift workers; and ensuring that improvements to walkability and bikeability connect people to the places they need and want to go. Participating as a member of an advisory committee or working with existing members is one way to guide the agency's priorities and plans. Including community members' perspectives in the conversation can help agencies come up with solutions that will make positive change on people who walk and bike to get groceries.

## How to Talk About Safe Routes to Healthy Food With Regional Planning Organizations

Effective communication requires understanding the needs, interests, and values of the target audience. In many regional planning agencies, transportation planning is not the only job at hand. Often these agencies are also tasked with planning for economic development, sustainability, food systems, housing needs, and stormwater management, among other things. From these responsibilities emerge a number of guiding values and interests that are common to many regional planning agencies: supporting economic vitality; creating safe, efficient transportation networks; improving community resiliency and environmental sustainability; creating healthy communities; and promoting social equity. Rather than presenting Safe Routes to Healthy Food as an entirely new concept for regional planning agencies to work on, it can be advantageous to communicate how working on it aligns with their existing values and interests. Here are suggested messages that may resonate with regional planning organizations about why to work on Safe Routes to Healthy Food:

### ***Supporting economic vitality***

Regional planning agencies care about stimulating and promoting regional prosperity. To achieve those ends, regional planning agencies work to understand how land use development patterns and current transportation networks may hinder the movement of people or goods throughout their region and work to address challenges. Advocates would do well to contextualize messages about Safe Routes to Healthy Food within a lens of supporting economic vitality. Recommended messages:

- Bike/pedestrian infrastructure promotes economic activity at businesses, especially where transit is unavailable.
- When people don't have ready access to affordable healthy food, they are burdened by costly barriers like cab fare or delivery fees, which means they have less spending money in their pockets to put back into the local economy. When people spend hours riding the bus due to infrequent headways and transfers, that is time they could be at work, spending with their families, helping kids with their homework, or getting involved in their communities.



Photo: Janet LaFleur



Photo: Michigan Municipal League

### ***Creating safe, efficient transportation networks***

Federal law requires MPOs to set Highway Safety Improvement Program safety targets, including the number of fatalities, rate of fatalities, number of serious injuries, rate of serious injuries, and number of non-motorized fatalities and non-motorized serious injuries.<sup>1</sup> This suggests that MPOs are accustomed to using data to inform the prioritization and selection of transportation projects in a region. It can be effective for advocates to present data that show how people in a region are affected by lack of adequate, safe transportation to healthy foods.

Recommended message:

- Due to unsafe routes in low-income communities and communities of color, these residents face higher rates of bicycle and pedestrian fatalities and serious injuries. It may also be worth noting that the lack of Safe Routes to Healthy Food may be contributing to the numbers of fatalities and injuries as people are walking and bicycling to food retailers in unsafe conditions.

Similarly, MPOs are required by law to undertake a Congestion Management Process, which systematically assesses the performance of a transportation system in a region, and devises strategies to mitigate traffic congestion.<sup>2</sup> To that end, framing requests about non-motorized transportation improvements as a strategy to mitigate traffic congestion may resonate with MPO staff. Recommended message:

- In the long term, promoting walking and bicycling is more effective at reducing congestion than roadway expansion.

### ***Improving community resiliency and sustainability***

For regional planning agencies, sustainability is about much more than our physical environment, though improving environmental sustainability is certainly a worthy goal. Regional planning agencies work to improve the triple bottom line: environmental, social, and economic sustainability. To appeal to decisionmakers focused on sustainability, frame messages to show how improving walkable, bikeable food access reduces carbon emissions, improves quality of life, and builds community resiliency in the face of a changing planet. Recommended messages:

- Safe routes to walk, bike, or take public transportation reduces dependence on gas-burning vehicles, which reduces our carbon footprint and subsequent climate degradation.
- People want to live in vibrant communities: with places to visit and shop, where they might run into neighbors or friends, somewhere they don't have to spend a fortune on transportation expenses or a ton of time getting from point A to point B, somewhere free of smog and pollution. People want to feel financially secure and part of community. Improving walkable, bikeable healthy food retail is a means to that end.
- Supporting walkable, bikeable food access ensures that residents are less reliant on cars in the face of natural disasters.

### **Promoting social equity**

MPOs are required to comply with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and environmental justice mandates.<sup>3</sup> Among other requirements, they must consider, and take steps to reduce, how transportation improvements (or lack thereof) disproportionately burden low-income populations and communities of color. Advocates can frame Safe Routes to Healthy Foods requests as supporting MPOs' compliance with Title VI and promoting social equity. Recommended messages:

- No one should have to spend hours on the bus or risk their life walking/bicycling on unsafe streets just to get to the grocery store.
- Not everyone has access to a car, so we need to improve the ways people get to the various places they get food.

### **How Regional Planning Agencies Can Work on Safe Routes to Healthy Food**

The following recommendations offer ideas for how regional planning agencies can improve safe, convenient access to healthy foods for people walking, bicycling, and taking public transportation. These suggestions take into account the fact that by definition, regional planning agencies work across multiple jurisdictions. As such, these approaches reflect the cross-jurisdictional scope instead of solutions that benefit only one community. The suggestions address the fact that these agencies often set policy and administer funds, but are not the entities tasked with implementation. This means that another agency or jurisdiction will be responsible for carrying the actions through and making change on the ground. The recommendations also consider that in urbanized areas, MPOs serve as the gatekeepers to federal transportation dollars, which means that policies and priorities they set can be followed by funds to implement those policies. Finally, these recommendations are informed by the fact that regional planning agencies may be accountable to federal government requirements (as well as those imposed by member governments). Here are four approaches regional planning organizations can use to improve walkable, bikeable, transit accessible healthy food access.

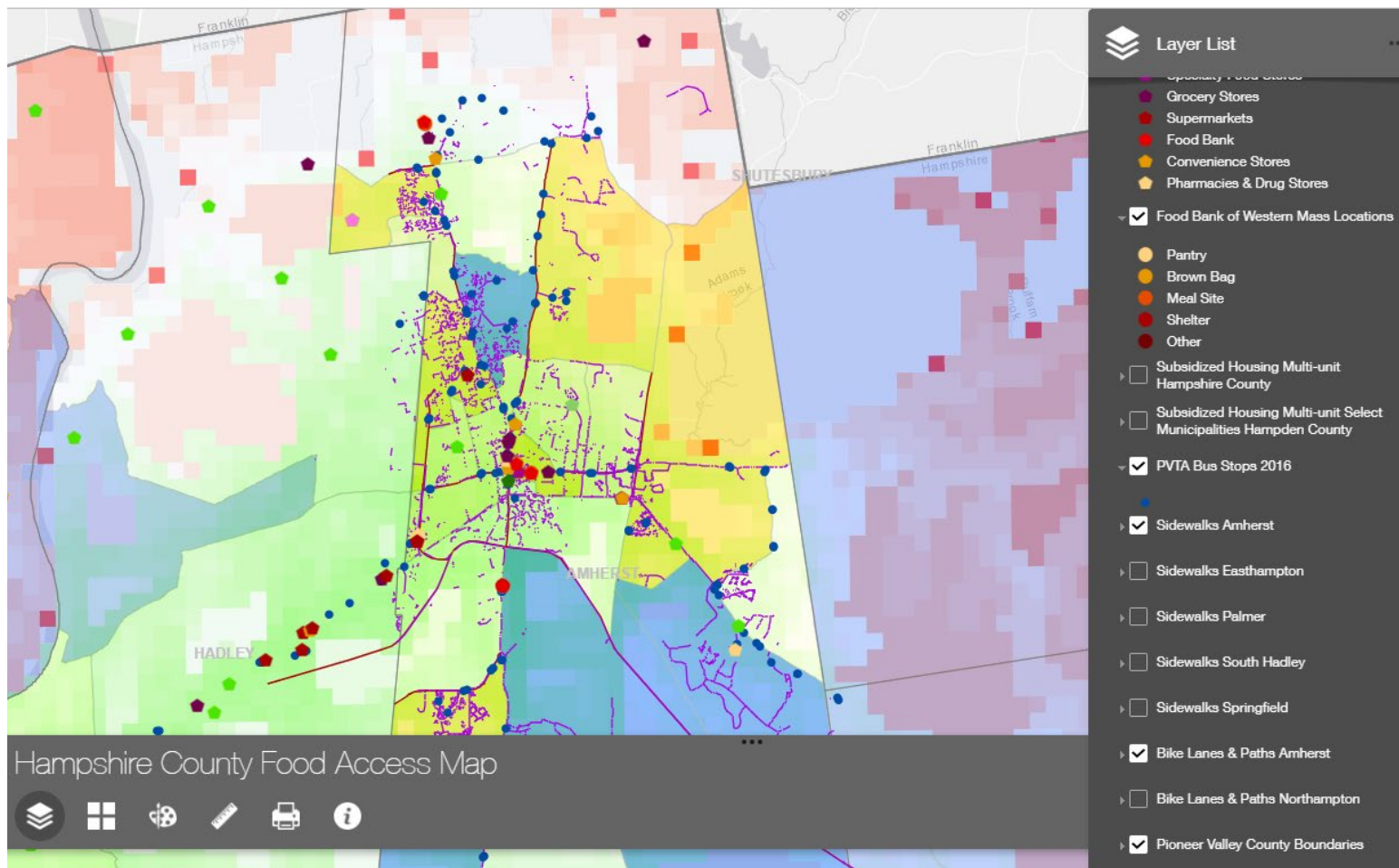
### **Creating healthy communities**

As part of their day-to-day function, regional planning agencies have the opportunity to influence health. Overwhelming evidence suggests that where people live, work, and play affects their ability to make healthy choices about food and physical activity. Tasked with land use and transportation planning, regional planning agencies are increasingly working to ensure that the decisions they make about land use patterns and transportation networks support safe, active transportation. Recommended messages:

- Making it easy for people to walk and bike to the places they get food provides a simple way to build physical activity into one's day.
- Easy transportation access to grocery reduces dependence on expensive, calorie-dense foods at corner stores and increases access to affordable fruits, vegetables, whole grain foods, and low-fat milk, which decrease risk of obesity and other chronic diseases.
- Unhealthy communities can drag down economic productivity.

#### **Transportation Improvement Program**

Metropolitan planning organizations are required by federal law to develop Transportation Improvement Programs (TIPs), comprehensive lists of transportation projects in an MPO's region covering a period of four years. TIPs include projects for multiple modes of transportation, including bicycle, pedestrian, public transit, and freight, in addition to car-centric transportation improvements. The TIP includes transportation projects that receive federal funding as well as state and locally-funded projects that are significant to the MPO's region. Developing a TIP gives an MPO the opportunity to prioritize funds for the various transportation needs in a region that align with the goals set out in its regional transportation plan. A project's inclusion in a TIP is a significant milestone on the road to implementation. To learn more about the Transportation Improvement Program, visit: <https://www.transit.dot.gov/regulations-and-guidance/transportation-planning/transportation-improvement-program-tip>



## 1. Measure what matters

### Develop publicly available tools/metrics for analyzing transportation access to essential community services, including healthy food access.

The purpose of mapping and conducting data analysis is to identify where to prioritize investments. By overlaying maps showing food deserts with maps of public transportation or census tracts with low-vehicle access, areas to prioritize for transportation improvements to grocery stores can emerge. At regional planning agencies, this data can be used to inform local Complete Streets project prioritization, public transportation planning, key processes such as Transportation Improvement Program project scoring, and more.

The Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC) in central Massachusetts has a track record of working on healthy food access. To identify priority areas where they should focus their work, PVPC developed a map that looks at demographic characteristics, including low vehicle access and low English proficiency, (which were identified by community member stakeholders experiencing low food access as the primary challenges to food access) and geographic proximity to healthy food venues.<sup>4</sup> This publicly available map highlights three priority areas where high need and low access intersect. Using this information, PVPC then worked with a local coalition, Healthy Hampshire, to develop an action plan to improve food access in these areas.



Photo: Lisa Kelly/The Food Trust

## ***2. Develop scoring criteria to advance Safe Routes to Healthy Food priorities***

**Add healthy food access to competitive project scoring sheets and provide extra points to transportation projects that improve healthy food access in such scoring and when developing a Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) project list.**

Project prioritization affects which projects get funded. Allocating additional points to projects that connect people, especially those without vehicles, to locations that serve or sell nutritious foods, like grocery stores, ensures that investments in transportation infrastructure connect people to the places they need to get to most.

In Nashville, Tennessee, the MPO's 25-year Regional Transportation Plan included a staff analysis of how roadways in the Nashville area can better connect residents to food retailers. The analysis was overlaid with maps that identified neighborhoods with lower income, minority and elderly residents who would benefit from transportation links to food retailers that did not require owning a car. The Nashville Area MPO included the analysis of food environments and community populations as one part of a comprehensive approach to promote the health and wellness of residents in the Nashville area. Importantly, this analysis was used as part of the project selection process.<sup>5</sup>

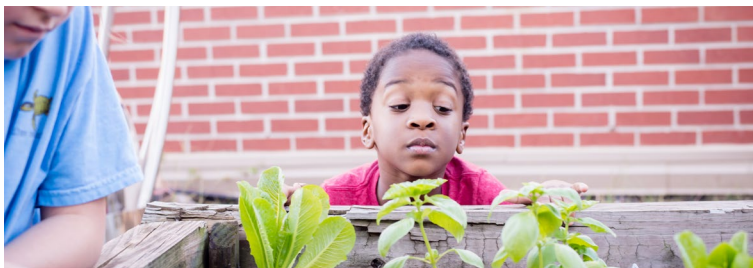
## ***3. Convene stakeholders and engage community members***

**Create advisory committees to advise on what are the real challenges and priorities and solutions. These committees can include people working in this space professionally as well as ordinary residents whose jobs do not center on transportation or healthy food access.**

A valuable role that regional planning agencies can take is that of convener. By bringing together seemingly different stakeholders, like food access advocates and transportation planners, regional planning agencies can foster collaborative solutions to some of their region's most pressing problems. Regional planning agencies can convene advisory councils to provide insight and guidance on what community members would like to see on the ground or what would truly support their needs. Community members experiencing transportation barriers to grocery stores can provide the keenest insight into specific challenges as well as offer solutions that will make a real impact in their lives. Regional planning agencies can recruit people from under-represented groups for boards and committees and provide them with extra support, resources, and the background they need to be successful. These members can and should be involved in preparing and setting the agenda for community advisory meetings.

Metropolitan Council, the metropolitan planning organization for the Twin Cities region of Minnesota, formed an Equity Advisory Committee in October 2015 with the intent to “create more equitable outcomes for the people who live and work in the region.”<sup>6</sup> Members of the Equity Advisory Committee represent eight geographic divisions of the region and special attention is made to ensure that people from the following groups are represented, “African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, immigrants and new Americans, low-wealth residents, and people with disabilities.”<sup>7</sup>

While working to improve transportation access to important community destinations like parks, grocery stores, and doctor’s offices, the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC, the metropolitan planning organization for the Greater Philadelphia area, encompassing parts of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware) sought community input from residents in Camden, New Jersey by hosting workshops. Although the workshops garnered some feedback, DVRPC decided that it could get more information by going to residents rather than requiring residents to come to them. DVRPC attended a community event, Camden Night Gardens, and invited residents to share their ideas there. By meeting residents in their community, DVRPC gained key insights about how to improve transportation access to important community destinations.



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## 4. Provide technical assistance, including model language for policies and plans

**Provide technical assistance to member governments on how to improve multimodal transportation options to healthy food venues. Provide model language for localities to adopt in Comprehensive Plans, Transportation Plans, Sustainability Plans, Design Guidelines. Incorporate healthy food access in Complete Streets policies.**

A function of many regional planning agencies is to support member cities, towns, and counties by providing model policy and plan language and technical assistance to local planners. It’s possible to increase local impact by building the capacity of regional planning organization staff to support local planners to work toward Safe Routes to Healthy Food. The Minnesota Food Planning Guide, developed by the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota, was co-chaired by a member of Metropolitan Council, the MPO for the Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota metro area, and includes sample transportation plan language to support multi-modal access to healthy foods.

## Conclusion

Given their multi-jurisdiction scope, control over federal transportation funding, and strong connection to local governments, regional planning agencies are well-positioned to improve Safe Routes to Healthy Food. In doing so, they can make it easier for people to walk, bike, and take public transit to the places where they buy and get healthy foods.<sup>8</sup>