

# Coalition for Active, Safe and Healthy Streets: Promoting Health by Improving Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety

## Summary

To help support its mission of reducing the number of heart attacks in the community of New Ulm, Minn., Hearts Beat Back: The Heart of New Ulm Project wanted to encourage people to be more physically active. With the help of funding from a Community Transformation Grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, project leaders organized the Coalition for Active, Safe and Healthy Streets in early 2014 to help create opportunities for people to safely walk and bike in the community. The coalition focused on opportunities for using a “Complete Streets” approach, where streets are planned to be safe and accessible for all users — pedestrians, transit riders, bicyclists and drivers — regardless of age or ability.

## Challenge

In New Ulm, 73 percent of adults are considered overweight or obese, which is a key risk factor for heart disease. While The Heart of New Ulm Project had implemented several programs at worksites and in the community over the years to help people lose weight, they were ready to move upstream to the next phase. This meant engaging community volunteers in creating policies and helping improve the built environment to make it easier for people to be active.

## Solution

To begin engaging and educating key stakeholders, the project invited two experts to visit New Ulm — Kelly Morphy, executive director of the Walkable and Livable Communities Institute (WALC) and Mark Fenton, a national public health, planning and transportation consultant. The team provided information to civic, city and county leaders on the many community benefits that can be gained through the implementation of Complete Street strategies. They also led groups on walking audits, conducted a driving tour, and interviewed several key leaders. The experts then created a report that identified specific areas that would benefit from relatively low-cost traffic calming measures to long-term structural changes to improve safety.



*Unsafe bicycle and pedestrian conditions on Garden St. prior to redesign*



*Coalition's first success: Expert and community input on the street's redesign resulted in significant safety improvements for bicyclists and pedestrians*

A new community leadership group was formed with several action teams to study, adjust and help implement the specific WALC report recommendations. The Coalition for Active, Safe and Healthy Streets is comprised of individuals representing multiple sectors, including the City of New Ulm, downtown businesses, schools, public health, New Ulm Medical Center, Brown County Board of Commissioners, the New Ulm City Council, a transportation planning expert and interested citizens.

“ Complete Streets for New Ulm is more than just making our streets pedestrian and bicycle-friendly — this effort can be life changing. It's encouraging people to get out of their cars and become healthier. Our streets can become entertaining, visually appealing, safer, offer convenience, and invite us outdoors. Several generations may benefit from this initiative in many ways. ”

— Dan Beranek, member, Coalition for Active, Safe and Healthy Streets

## Results

The coalition's first step was to prioritize the recommendations according to ease of implementation and cost. One recommendation became a clear top priority due to fortuitous timing. A section of an important street near the high school, recreation center and county services building was already scheduled for resurfacing in summer 2014. Although a two-lane street, the width promoted speed and created an unsafe environment for pedestrians and bicyclists.

The coalition was able to provide the city with input on the street's redesign and the New Ulm City Council subsequently approved several improvements to make the street significantly safer. These included the elimination of parking on the residential side of the street, the addition of bike lanes on each side of the street, and a mid-block crosswalk with an island and angled crosswalk.

With work completed prior to the start of the school year, feedback from community members has been mostly positive; educational efforts are ongoing. Volunteers took pedestrian and bicyclist traffic counts at various times prior to and following the resurfacing project to measure usage differences along the stretch. This information is helping the Safe Routes to School action team consider the most effective strategies to encourage and educate students and parents on the proper use of bike lanes and pedestrian safety.

“ I think Garden Street is great. I have seen people biking safely to school and people jogging. One thing I have noticed as I drop off children in the morning is that adults seem to drive slower, paying more attention while driving on the street. That is the best part! Thank you for being part of the solution. ”

— Peggy Drugan,  
community member



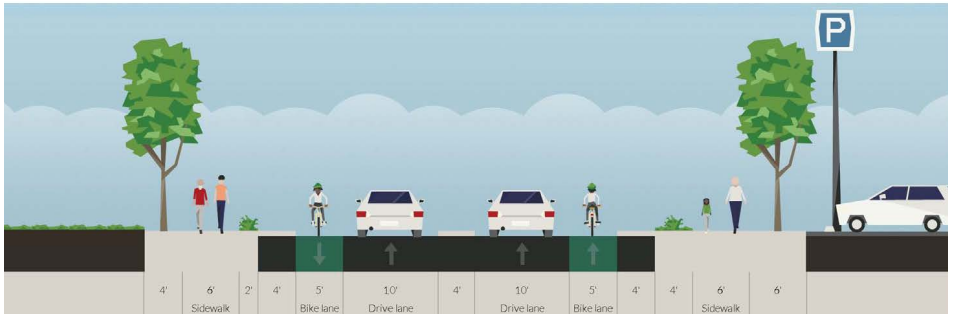
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## Sustaining Success

By continuing to support a focus on policy, systems and environmental changes, the project is helping to ensure long-term sustainability of the community's health improvement efforts. Specifically in the area of physical activity, The Coalition for Active, Safe and Healthy Streets' various action teams are working on other areas identified in the WALC report, providing education on bicycle and pedestrian safety, and helping develop policies or procedures that ensure all users are taken into account whenever any street work is done over the next several years.

A Safe Routes to School action team is looking at the school arrival and departure process. A Revitalize Downtown action team is considering converting prime intersections into gateway entrances, converting a key street to a bike boulevard by reducing it to a 20 mph speed limit, restoring two-way traffic to downtown streets, and allowing “parklets” downtown. A Bike Trail Connections action team has identified designated bike routes through town that use low-volume streets to connect the bike trail with schools, businesses, the medical center and recreation centers. The team is creating a map of the routes and is partnering with the Safe Routes to School action team to add designated walking routes.



## Get Involved

The actions we take as individuals will not solely solve major health problems. Health problems are influenced by societal policies and environments that promote unhealthy behaviors, or fail to foster healthier choices. For example, a walkable and livable community helps encourage people to get outside and be more physically active, which is vitally important in helping people improve their health.

By engaging key stakeholders in education, planning and implementation of appropriate policies and changes to the built environment, communities can ensure a supportive, safe and accessible environment for physical activity.

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