

# B. BUILDING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

The Healthy Communities Tool Kit provides ideas and best practices for inspiring more people to adopt active lifestyles and enjoy more time outdoors. Close-to-home opportunities for outdoor recreation are essential to building healthier communities, therefore, the tool kit emphasizes ways in which community leaders and organizations can inspire more frequent use of existing green spaces, parks and trails.

## Best Practices For Building Healthy Communities

Improve existing parks and open spaces with outdoor recreational facilities and equipment that invite recreation, play, physical activity as well as passive uses such as picnics. Provide facilities to accommodate a diversity of uses and to make park outings more convenient and more appealing for residents. For example, any of the following facilities could help “activate” a park and/or make it more comfortable and inviting for nearby residents:

- Flexible, open fields and ball courts
- Marked and groomed Nordic trails for winter use
- Exercise park/Fitness stations
- Walking paths / trails
- Playground / Nature Play Features
- Community gardens
- Hammocks
- Shade shelters
- Picnic tables
- Grills
- Seating / Benches
- Amenities such as drinking fountains, trash cans and restrooms
- Disc golf
- Dog park
- Pump Track or bike features
- Food Trucks or Concessions (e.g., food and beverage sales)
- Chess tables, lawn games
- Internet access
- Outdoor performance venues (e.g., stage, band shell, amphitheater)

**Co-locate activities and recreational facilities.** Recreational opportunities should provide universal appeal. For instance, provide adult exercise equipment or walking tracks near children’s playgrounds to offer an opportunity for parents and guardians to exercise while they are supervising their children. Access to safe neighborhood play spaces for children is associated with higher rates of physical activity and lower rates of time spent watching television and playing video games.

## Utilize joint-use agreements to increase recreational opportunities.

Establish agreements to make school and community facilities (e.g., ball fields, playgrounds) accessible to the general public for physical activity outside of regular hours. Recreation facilities on school campuses can often serve broader community needs. The shared use of school recreational facilities can provide safe and affordable places for communities. Studies suggest that challenges to shared use include additional cost, liability protection, communication among constituencies interested in sharing space, and decision-making about scheduling and space allocation. In some cases, a community may partner with school districts to share the costs, building and maintenance of recreation facilities.

## Activate the Parks with Outdoor Events and Programming.

Activities and events hosted at parks, trails and nature areas are a great way to draw in non-regular visitors and encourage more widespread enjoyment of outdoor spaces. Programming and events that would bring people outside who might not otherwise visit include:

- Boot camps
- Yoga
- Concerts
- Lectures
- Outdoor films
- Nature-based programs (e.g., plant identification tours, bird watching) also draw and enjoying the outdoors on their own.

**More Parks!** Neighborhood parks offer opportunities to connect with nature, get exercise, build recreation skills and, simply, have fun. Communities can commit to increasing park and open space acreage by prioritizing purchases of public or conservation easements, and allocating existing open spaces such as vacant or under utilized lands for parks, trails and playgrounds in their comprehensive plans. When looking for new park and public recreation spaces, consider building new facilities along existing trails and/or within easy access from town centers or public transit routes. Also prioritize creating, maintaining or renovating open spaces and parks near residents’ homes.



Indian paintbrush outside South Fork (courtesy of Root House Studio)

**Consider Pop-up Parks.** Pop-up parks are temporary public spaces that allow communities to test-drive new concepts for public spaces. Examples of possible pop-up outdoor recreational activities include temporary shutting down roads to create “play streets”, movies in the park, yoga classes, boot camps, soapbox lectures and parking spots converted to mini parks. Pop-up parks require little investment and allow a community to explore which recreational activities best suit its residents and to test how these activities might energize public spaces and facilitate outdoor recreation, thereby leading to a more healthy local population.

**Improve Safety.** Sometimes anxiety about safety prevent residents from using outdoor community spaces. A community can build a greater sense of safety by increasing policing in high-crime areas, parks, and along pedestrian walkways. Neighboring residents can also take it upon themselves to organize a group to frequently visit a nearby park and discourage crime and unwanted park uses with more “eyes on the park” and regular use.

**Improve walkability and bicycling.** A walkable and bikeable community helps improve the health of residents and employees. Revisiting and improving street design is a popular approach to improving walkability in a community and encouraging more people to be active. Green up and enliven transportation corridors (streets, alleys, walking paths, and sidewalks) with vegetation, trees and art installations in order to make walking and biking more pleasurable. Potential improvements could include:

- Use universal design principles to make pedestrian corridors accessible to all including those with mobility issues.
- Enhance the connectivity between streets and trails.
- Calm traffic to slow down vehicles.
- Build-out and ensure connection of sidewalks.
- Provide safe crossings with adequate signage, lighting and visibility.
- Designate walking and biking trails and corridors throughout the community. The participation rate in outdoor recreation of youth who live in communities with designated walking and biking trails is significantly higher than youth without. The participation rate of youth with nearby walking routes is 21 percent higher, and the participation rate of youth with nearby biking routes is nearly 25 percent higher (The Outdoor Foundation, 2010).

**Provide more safe and convenient bicycle access to and through SLV communities with signed networks of on and off-street facilities, low-speed streets, and ample bike parking.** Survey after survey shows that the physical environment is a key determinant in whether people will get on a bike and ride (League of American Bicyclists, <http://bikeleague.org/>). Developing and promoting the infrastructure that welcomes cycling is essential to getting more residents moving about on bikes. Such infrastructure consists of quiet neighborhood

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streets, conventional and protected bike lanes, shared use trails, and policies to ensure connectivity and maintenance of these facilities.

- It is also vital to make motorists and cyclists aware of their rights and responsibilities on the road through public education campaigns and signs that promote the Share the Road message.
- Allocate room on the road for bicyclists with protected bike lanes, on-street bike lanes, bicycle boulevards.
- Identify corridors that could accommodate Off-street trail system/multi-use paths/greenways such as ditches or rail corridors (see Trail Connections tool kit for more on this topic).

**Promote bicycling for recreation, commuting and errands.** Biking around town is a fun, easily accessible recreation activity as well as a means of transportation and a good form of exercise. Communities, businesses and educational institutions play a critical role in encouraging people to ride by giving them a variety of opportunities and incentives to get on their bikes. Together they can help build a strong SLV bike culture with incentives, promotions and opportunities that inspire and enable people to ride.

- Communicate the health benefits of bicycling to residents as well as the importance of safely sharing the road.
- Develop community bike maps that highlight

recommended travel routes and depict bike paths, bike lanes, quiet streets and trails so residents can identify safe routes for bike riding.

- Route finding signage to demarcate safe travel routes.
- Offer several ways for people to develop the skills and build the confidence to ride bikes.
- Incorporate bicycle-safety education being a routine part of public education.
- Communities, businesses and campuses can offer options for adults looking to improve their biking skills with everything from online tips, brown bag lunch presentations and in-depth on-bike training opportunities.
- Bicycle-themed celebrations and rides (e.g., Cycloviva, MS 150, Ride for the Cure).
- Group rides / interpretive bike tours.
- Tie into existing promotional and educational campaigns such as National Bike Month and Bike to Work Day.

**Invite the Community to Tend Parks and Green Spaces.** Where possible, alter the operation and maintenance of highly used outdoor places and spaces to encourage residents to assume as much of their stewardship as possible. Working with soil, planting and tending gardens are healthy outdoor activities that prompt people to nurture more of an attachment to their communities green spaces. Citizen stewardship



A parking space converted into a temporary park. For more examples of "pop-up" parks and "parklets" check out: <http://www.pinterest.com/popuprepublic/parklets-from-pavement-to-greenspace/>



will require parks and recreation departments and public land management agencies to provide volunteer oversight. Hands on projects and citizen stewardship has the potential to build people's familiarity, use of, and attachment to the land, as well as their sense of community.

**Occasionally Reduce Transportation and Cost Barriers.** To increase exposure to outdoor recreation sites establish (and promote) "no fee" days a couple times a year. Similarly, offer free shuttles to nearby nature areas, trail and recreation sites. Target populations who under use parks and outdoor spaces and bring large, cohesive groups out a time (e.g., youth group members, neighbors).

**Rent Equipment.** Sometimes not having or not wanting to purchase the gear specific to an outdoor recreational pursuit can be a deterrent to participation. A community can help overcome this obstacle by establishing equipment rental facilities. Recreation departments could rent out equipment at major parks. Equipment doesn't necessarily have to be purchased new and can be acquired from donations or second-hand stores.

Communities and local organizations can also strike up partnerships with equipment manufacturers. For example, a bike manufacturer could be invited to bring a fleet of demo bikes to the community in conjunction with an event. Outdoor groups can also facilitate equipment distribution by hosting annual used gear sales.

**Raise awareness of the Health Benefits of Outdoor Recreation.** Let the general public know of the health benefits of contact with nature and outdoor physical activity. Dedicate a section of the community's website to health and the outdoors and include health and wellness tips, a map of local parks and trails, and a calorie-burning calculator for recreation users. This and other information regarding the health benefits of outdoor recreation could also be featured in the local papers and made available at health care institutions, including hospitals and doctor offices. A local example is the SLV Regional Medical Center's "Coming Alive" program to promote active living.

## HEALTHY COMMUNITY CHECKLIST

- Ensure there are **convenient, outdoor spaces** for community residents to recreate and enjoy the outdoors.
- Improve the walk and bike-ability** of community streets (e.g., build sidewalks, mark crosswalks, install traffic calming devices, plant street trees to create shaded walks, post Share the Road signs, stripe shoulders, build off-street greenways).
- Open school facilities** such as playgrounds, fields and trails open to the community after-school hours.
- Make a **map** available (in print or online) that depicts safe bike routes, parks, and other places for outdoor recreation.
- Offer **bicycling education** courses. Host a community cycling events or rides.
- Promote the health benefits** of outdoor recreation
- Improve and draw attention to the community's **parks, trails, and green spaces.**

## CASE STUDIES: Healthy Communities



Food trucks are a great way to lure people out into parks and the outdoors. Every Wed and Thursday food trucks park at Grand Park in Los Angeles and the "Food Truck" invasion at Port St. Lucia, FL's Tradition Square brings families out to eat and play.

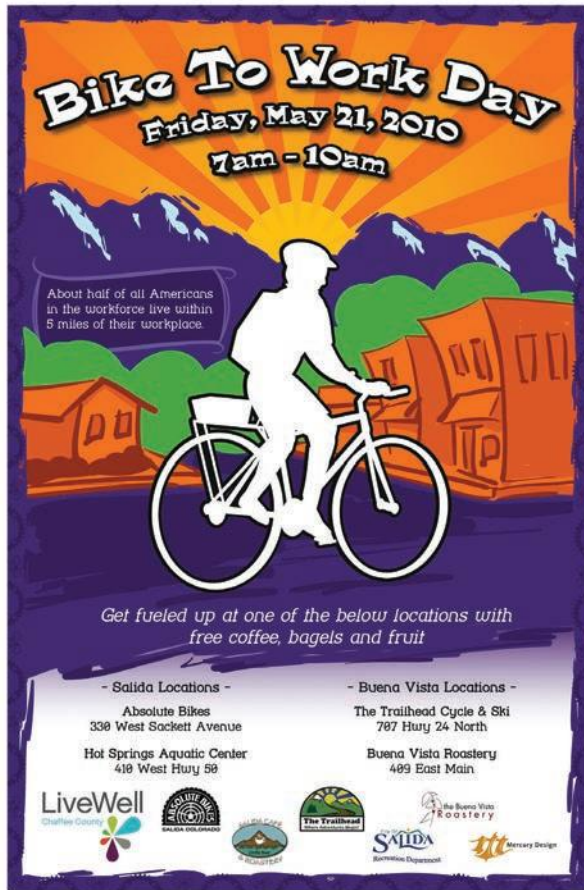


Fort Collins' Bike Library and Boulder's bike sharing stations encourage biking by making bikes easily accessible and affordable. Additionally, the small town of La Veta makes 4 townie bikes available outside of its library. They are available for checkout for up to two hours, Monday through Saturday.



Boot camps, yoga and other activities provide alternative exercise options and draw people outdoors and into parks.





Salida and Buena Vista, CO host an annual "Bike to Work Day." A family friendly event that promotes the use of bikes as a mode of transportation and healthy form of exercise.

Find partners to help spread the word about outdoor recreation opportunities and to boost its appeal. The Iowa Department of Natural Resources and the Archery Trade Association partnered on this campaign to get those who have never tried archery involved in the sport. Metz Elementary in Monte Vista partners with CPW on a similar program.



More and more communities are incorporating fitness stations into park and along trail systems. They essentially serve as outdoor gyms.

