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# Project U-Turn

## Increasing Active Transportation in Jackson, Michigan

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**Background:** Jackson, Michigan, is a medium-sized city suffering from a bad economy and obesity-related health issues. Nearly 20% of the 36,000 residents live below the poverty line. It is a relatively young city (median age of 30 years) with a mixed ethnicity (20% black, 73% white, 4% Hispanic). The city offers many structured, active recreational opportunities, but has not integrated physical activity into daily life.

**Intervention:** Project U-Turn aimed to increase active transportation (e.g., biking, walking, and transit use) through an integrated approach to Active Living by Design's community action model and the Michigan Safe Routes to School model. Resources were focused on active living promotions and programs; partnership meetings were the source of changes in policy and physical projects. Each initiative was designed to introduce each of the 5Ps (preparation, promotion, programs, policy, and physical projects) to build support for the partnership's overall work.

**Results:** The partnership collected snapshot data of community walking and biking behavior, percentage of students walking to school, participation in events and programs, and new physical projects. Jackson saw a vast improvement in physical infrastructure and policy and a related increase in walking and biking in the community.

**Lessons learned:** The project engaged in purposeful partnership building to implement effective programs and promotions that built support for policy and physical projects. Limited resources were best used by encouraging partners to contribute and coordinate activities using existing staff, funding, and resources.

**Conclusions:** Jackson has seen a shift toward awareness of the benefits of active living on community health, economic development, and environmental awareness.  
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### Introduction

Project U-Turn addressed the health concerns of Jackson, Michigan, by simultaneously promoting walking and biking in the community and creating a safe environment in which to do so. Jackson's level of obesity mirrors the state level, which consistently ranks near the top among the most obese states in the nation. In 2002, one in five Jackson residents was obese, and two thirds of the population was overweight.<sup>1</sup> This trend crosses generations; childhood obesity and chronic disease in older adults are growing threats.

Prior to Project U-Turn, Jackson already offered a wide variety of active recreation options. This relatively small city (11.1 square miles) boasts 22 parks with a total of 635 acres of recreational space. Therefore,

Project U-Turn did not address destination-based, organized physical activity. Instead, this project focused on active transportation. Since all Jackson residents live within 5 miles of schools, churches, parks, entertainment, and shopping, the goal of Project U-Turn was to increase the proportion of short trips (i.e., 2 miles walking, 5 miles biking) that involve active transportation. These distances were chosen because they represent 30 minutes of exercise at a moderate speed.

Project U-Turn was guided by an existing partnership of health and community development leaders called the Walkable Communities Task Force (Task Force), which had previous experience implementing active-living community design elements, such as a citywide bike route and marked fitness trails. The mission of the Fitness Council of Jackson (to lead the community in lifelong physical activity) made it a natural fit as the lead agency in the Task Force.

The Active Living by Design (ALbD) 5P model<sup>2</sup> drove the work plan for Project U-Turn ([www.activelivingbydesign.org/our-approach/community-action-model](http://www.activelivingbydesign.org/our-approach/community-action-model); preparation, promotion, programs, policy, and physical projects).

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In order to achieve the overall goal of increasing walking and biking trips, the Task Force developed strategies to:

- develop an effective partnership to promote active living;
- increase community awareness of the benefits of active living;
- increase access to opportunities for active living;
- enhance public policy and organizational support for active living;
- improve the built environment to support active living.

## Methods

### Settings and Populations

The City of Jackson is a blue-collar city of 36,000 people in south-central Michigan, located at the crossing of two major highways. The population is somewhat racially diverse (20% black, 74% white, and 4% Hispanic), and 30% of the population is aged <18 years.<sup>3</sup>

Jackson is intricately linked to the prison industry. The original stone walls of Michigan's first state prison still stand on the north side of town, where prison labor in the mid-1800s helped establish a strong manufacturing economy that later thrived in conjunction with Detroit's automotive industry. Those manufacturing jobs are now disappearing, resulting in increasing unemployment rates from 6.5% in 2002 to 9.5% in 2008. Approximately one fifth of Jacksonians currently live below the poverty line.<sup>3</sup>

The decline in the economy is mirrored by growing levels of obesity-related health issues. High levels of obese (21%) and overweight (62%) people match the state-level data for Michigan.<sup>1</sup> Thirty-nine percent of children in the city have elevated cholesterol, and a recent community health assessment showed that one in seven Jackson residents has diabetes.<sup>4</sup>

In 2003, the city was ripe with opportunity for a cultural and health "u-turn," and momentum was already building. The old prison had been redeveloped as a live-work space for artists. The local United Way, the county, and Allegiance Hospital were in the process of developing strategic plans to address community health concerns. A successful active living campaign would demonstrate that a healthy community is not a luxury that only large, elite cities can afford.

### Active Living by Design Community Action Model

Instead of focusing all resources on one major improvement, Project U-Turn outlined an integrated approach to increasing active transportation by investing limited resources in small-scale efforts that addressed each of the 5Ps. This strategy took advantage of a diverse partnership and a broad scope of potential resources. The goal was to affect a wide variety of audiences, locations, and policies throughout the city through the 5P model.

**Preparation.** The initial focus was to develop a strong and diverse partnership to direct the project. The Task Force included a wide range of community leaders in transportation, health, education, and community development (Table

1). The city council recognized the Task Force as an advisory group on walking and biking concerns, which legitimized the Task Force's input on policy and infrastructure. For example, a Complete Streets resolution was introduced to the council through the Task Force. Regular meetings provided a point of contact and collaboration among the represented organizations, resulting in policies and physical projects that required interorganizational coordination (e.g., Safe Routes to School [Safe Routes]).

The Fitness Council of Jackson led the Task Force with a small staff. They organized guest speakers and reported on national conferences such as ProWalk/ProBike. They also organized community events such as Smart Commute Day and Safe Routes programs.

Project U-Turn included youth both as an audience and as a component of the leadership team. The Student Coalition for Walkable Communities provided a youth perspective on active transportation by attending Task Force meetings and developing their own projects, including an inventory of downtown bike parking, youth-oriented active transportation presentations, and a proposal for a Cool Bus that would attract teen riders. They made considerable progress in the early years of the grant, but as key students graduated, the group lost momentum and the student coalition was dissolved in 2005.

**Implementation.** As the lead agency, the Fitness Council of Jackson implemented programs and promotions with the support of the Task Force. Project U-Turn began with a Safe Routes initiative in local schools. This Safe Routes concept was eventually expanded from the schools to other common destinations such as worksites, churches, parks, and shopping centers. Programs and promotional events such as the Walking School Bus and Smart Commute Day encouraged walking and biking to these destinations, while the Task Force identified the policies and physical projects necessary to increase accessibility to places supporting active lifestyles.

**Promotion.** The Fitness Council spearheaded a variety of active transportation promotions (Table 2). Each promotional approach was developed from the general theme that active transportation is healthy, viable, and fun. The Fitness Council website highlighted the health benefits of staying active; newsletters showcased stories of Jackson residents who "made a U-Turn" by incorporating walking or biking into their daily routine; and press releases emphasized the popularity of new trails and bike lanes.

Events were a large part of the promotional effort and were tied directly to long-term programming. Schools held Walk to School Day events in conjunction with Safe Routes programs. The Fitness Council coordinated volunteers and media attention to raise community awareness of the effort to encourage kids to walk to school. Similarly, the Fitness Council organized an annual Smart Commute Day, which promoted the possibility of including walking, biking, and transit into the daily commute. Interbusiness competition, prizes, and free breakfast enticed people to try a more active commute and generated interest in the long-term, employer-based Foot Energy program ([www.fitnesscouncil.org/walktowork.htm](http://www.fitnesscouncil.org/walktowork.htm)).

Project U-Turn also promoted Jackson as a community that supports active transportation. The Task Force applied for

**Table 1.** Walkable Communities Task Force (WCTF) representation

Organization	Title of representative	Contributions
Historic Commission	Commissioner	Safe Routes to School, bike parking Support
Active Living by Design	Program officer	
Center for Family Health	Operations director	
Jackson County Health Department	Director	
Dawn Foods	Human resources	Smart Commute, Foot Energy
Foundation for a Healthy Community	Health educator	
Foot Hospital	General counsel	Smart Commute, Safe Routes to School, Community Bikes
Consumers Energy	Communications director	Smart Commute
Jackson Police Department	Police officer	
Downtown Development Authority	Executive director	Safe Routes to School
Lifeways	Wellness team	Bike lanes, Smart Commute, promotion
Jackson Citizen Patriot	Editor	Foot Energy program, Smart Commute
League of MI Bicyclists	Retiree	Promotion
Jackson Transportation Authority	General manager	Walking School Bus, bike parking
City of Jackson	Assistant city engineer	bike racks on buses, Smart Commute, Cool Bus
Jackson Public Schools	Health and human services coordinator	Bike lanes, sidewalk and crossing improvements, Safe Routes to School, bike parking
Middle School at Parkside	Educator	
disAbility Connections	Executive director	
Region 2 Planning Commission	Director	
Cascades Cycling Club	Member	Safe Routes to School
Fitness Council of Jackson	Executive director	
The Enterprise Group	Economic development	
Pedal and Tour	Owner	
Department on Aging/Health Department	Health educator	
Governor's Council on Physical Fitness	Director of active community environments	Safe Routes to School, connecting to state-level projects
Downtown Development Authority	President	Bike parking, Smart Commute
Spring Arbor University: Jackson Site	Recruitment specialist	
Friends of the Falling Waters Trail	President	Smart Commute, Safe Routes to School, Cool Bus
		Falling Waters Trail, bike map, active transportation survey, ArtsWalk

recognition of its efforts, resulting in a silver-level recognition from Michigan's Promoting Active Communities program and an honorable mention from the League of American Bicyclists' Bicycle Friendly Communities program. The Fitness Council presented its work at the 2006 National Bike Summit, and Jackson's Safe Routes to School initiative was presented at national conferences, including the 2006 ProWalk/ProBike Conference and the 2007 National Safe Routes to School Conference.

The combination of promoting active transportation to the community along with promoting Jackson as an active-living community created a positive message of community change. For example, in 2005, a billboard campaign asked people to register their support of bike lanes through the Fitness Council website. The billboard raised public awareness of existing bike lanes. Over 200 registered names provided evidence of community support for the new bike lanes requested by the Task Force. Registrants then received updates on new bike facilities. They were also called on to support initiatives

such as the Grand River ArtsWalk project and Complete Streets resolutions. In this iterative process, the initial promotion raised general awareness and developed an audience for policy and physical projects. These improvements were then promoted to the audiences created through the initial promotion efforts.

**Programs.** While Project U-Turn took an integrated approach to the 5P model, a main focus was on programs. Similar to promotions, Project U-Turn programs extended from and contributed to all areas of the 5P model. The most obvious example was Jackson's Safe Routes program. This initiative was based on a 5E model, which, similar to the 5P model, aims to coordinate change in five main areas (i.e., engineering, education, enforcement, encouragement, and evaluation).<sup>5</sup> The heart of Jackson's program was a Walking School Bus, in which volunteers walked to school with groups of elementary-aged students. However, the Safe Routes program included recommendations on school policy, improvements to the

**Table 2.** Major accomplishments

Category	Accomplishment	Date
Promotion	Fitness Council website and quarterly newsletter	ongoing
	Billboard campaign supporting bike lanes	2005
	Over 30 press releases per year promoting active transportation	ongoing
	Jackson bike map	2006
	Four annual Smart Commute days with continuously increasing participation	ongoing
Program	1200 students participate in Walk to School Day	2007
	Walking School Bus programs started at four elementary schools	2005
	MPRI bike classes	2008–present
Physical projects	Foot Energy	2006
	Falling Waters 10.2-mile rail-trail	2007
	City engineering coordinated 6 miles of bike lanes, more than 50 crosswalks, and other infrastructure improvements	2004–2008
Policy	Safe Routes to School grant provided new sidewalk and bike racks for elementary schools	2008
	Bike racks on public buses	2007
	Complete Streets resolutions (city, county, and MPO)	2006
	Busing study identifies cost savings resulting from reduced bus service and improving the walking and biking environment	2008

MPO, metropolitan planning organization; MPRI, Michigan Prisoner ReEntry Initiative

walking and biking environment (e.g., bike racks, sidewalks), and promotional events.

Further, the Safe Routes model was adapted to address commuting behavior at worksites. An initial interest by employers in Smart Commute Day activities led to participation in the Foot Energy program, which applied the Safe Routes model to the workplace. Just like Safe Routes, Foot Energy utilized attitude and behavior surveys, policy evaluation, a walking audit, and encouragement programs to create a more walkable, bike-friendly workplace and surrounding area.

A pilot version of this program was carried out at Lifeways, a local employer of approximately 70 staff. Working with Lifeways' Wellness Team, the Fitness Council led employees through the walking audit and policy evaluation, completed an employee survey, and established a program to encourage walking, including individual Active Transportation Plans, motivational emails, and a company bike program through which employees could borrow a bike and helmet to run errands and attend meetings.

The Task Force was able to implement these programs with minimal staff support by using existing resources that can be easily adapted for new audiences. For example, the Task Force recognized the benefit of using the established Safe Routes program designed by the State of Michigan. By using an existing handbook and application process, the Task Force avoided costly program development efforts, and the Fitness Council staff moved immediately to working with area schools to implement components of the state-level program.

The Community Bikes program also exemplifies the nexus of integrated programming adapted to new audiences. This program used donated bikes, certified bicycling educators, and components of the League of American Bicyclists' Road 1 curriculum to provide a transportation solution for recent parolees. The Fitness Council worked with the Michigan Prisoner ReEntry Initiative to provide bikes, helmets, and training in safe and effective cycling to recently released parolees with transportation barriers. Participants learned the basics of riding safely in traffic and bad weather, bike security, equipment maintenance, and route selection in the city.

Each of these programs introduced participants to the promotions, policies, and physical projects developed by the Task

Force; thus, support increased for active transportation to additional destinations and for all populations throughout the city.

**Policy and physical projects.** Project U-Turn did not directly fund infrastructure projects. Instead, the Task Force focused on building community support and educating decision makers on the benefits of policy and physical projects that support active transportation. In this sense, these two P's can be considered as a single effort, which resulted in numerous environmental changes.

This approach allowed the Task Force to leverage the small ALbD grant to secure additional grants for big projects. Fitness Council staff wrote grants and contributed to fundraising efforts for construction of the \$2 million, 10.5-mile Falling Waters rails-to-trails project. They also requested funding to install bike racks on public buses. Through the Safe Routes initiative, schools requested funding for new sidewalks and a study on the financial impact of introducing pedestrian improvements and programs to replace some bus routes.

Often, funding was not as important as connecting the right people. The Task Force members and relationships were essential in institutionalizing active transportation projects and policy. For example, having representatives from the city, county, and the Metropolitan Planning Organization on the Task Force provided the opportunity to introduce Complete Streets resolutions at each level of government. Through a more direct route, the Task Force collaborated with city engineering to incorporate pedestrian and bike facilities in road projects whenever possible. When the Grand River ArtsWalk was threatened by difficulties obtaining an easement, Task Force members rallied the community to publicly support the project and hold the city accountable for completing the project. The formal and informal connections critical to each of these projects were cultivated in the Task Force.

## Results

Project U-Turn appears to have generated more walking and biking trips in Jackson. An annual active transporta-

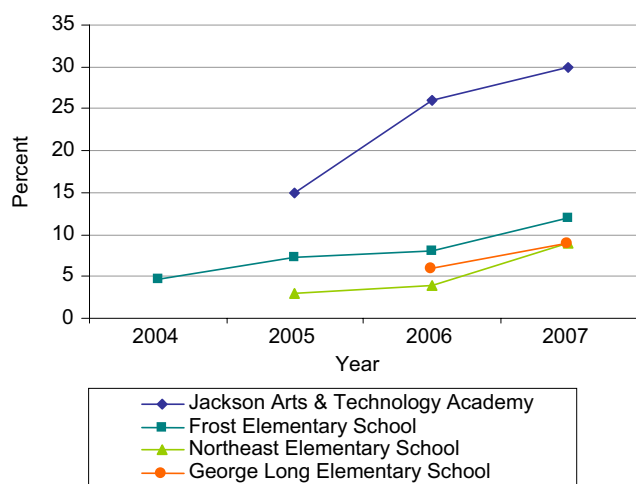
tion study provided a snapshot of daily cycling and pedestrian activity recorded in 15 locations throughout the city over the course of a week in late summer. The 2005 study documented a citywide count of 1028 people using active transportation; a year later, this study showed an increase in active transportation of 63%.<sup>6</sup>

This broadly measured increase is reflected in the results of specific programs such as the Safe Routes initiative. Safe Routes survey data indicated a steady increase in the number of students who walk to school (Figure 1). At the same time, participation in Walk to School Day also increased from 600 students in 2003 to more than 1200 in 2008. A Safe Routes grant awarded approximately \$100,000 for physical projects, including new bike racks and sidewalks around four schools, and a recently released busing study, which recommended policy change by demonstrating potential savings of more than \$500,000 per year in transportation costs by replacing some bus routes with walking and biking programs.

The Walking School Bus program has not sustained growth as well as other Safe Routes components. Walking School Bus routes were popular early in the Safe Routes process, when nearly 60 children participated in six adult-led groups of walkers. However, interest from students and staff waned once the application for Safe Routes funding was completed.

Only one of the six original routes is still active; yet that route played an important role in encouraging walking. In fact, none of these elements could have been effective on their own. The components worked in concert to bring about the general increase in walking and biking to school (Figure 1).

Similarly, the Community Bike Program produced a measurable increase in cyclists using and requesting improvements to bike facilities throughout the city. Approximately 60% of the 100 participants served in the first year



**Figure 1.** Percentage of elementary school students walking to school during the Safe Routes to School program period (2004–2007)

**Table 3.** Active living funding sources

Funding source	Amount (\$)
Michigan State Medical Society	2,500
Allegiance Community Programs Grant	7,750
DALMAC grant	6,420
Jackson County Community Foundation	12,000
Speckard–Knight Foundation	9,000
Consumer’s Energy Foundation	2,600
Michigan Prisoner ReEntry Initiative	20,000
Members, Sponsors, and Contributions	26,225
Ruth Mott Foundation	54,826
Community Energy Project (MDOE)	18,000
Safe Routes to School grant (MDOT)	120,000
Falling Water Trail Support (multiple sources)	1,850,000
Grand River ArtsWalk (MDOT and MDEQ)	1,500,000
Michigan Nutrition Network	27,000
<b>Total Non-ALbD Funding</b>	<b>3,656,321</b>

ALbD, Active Living by Design; DALMAC, Dick Allen Lansing to Mackinaw (bicycle tour); MDEQ, Michigan Department of Environmental Quality; MDOE, Michigan Department of Energy; MDOT, Michigan Department of Transportation

reported continued use of their bike for transportation 1 month after receiving a bike and training. Smart Commute Day participation also increased steadily, from 165 people in 2004 to 520 in 2008. These programs and promotional events created growing demand for better walking and biking environments.

As a result, city policy and the physical environment became more accommodating to active transportation in many ways (Table 2). The regional planning commission, the county, and the city have all adopted Complete Streets resolutions, committing themselves to consider bike and pedestrian needs on all road projects and planning. Many physical projects also resulted from collaboration with the city engineering staff. The city added approximately 6 miles of bike lanes, 50 new zebra-striped crosswalks, and numerous other improvements in the past 5 years. The highlight of Jackson’s active transportation environment was the completion of the 10.5-mile Falling Waters Trail, which created the backbone of a trails system that will eventually cross Jackson County. The city also received conditional approval for a \$1 million matching grant from the Michigan Department of Transportation to extend the same trail system north via the Grand River ArtsWalk, connecting the downtown to the new arts district.

The resources generated through Project U-Turn demonstrate the success of the project. The Task Force leveraged the \$200,000 ALbD grant to receive more than \$3.6 million in funding to support a variety of active living projects over the past 5 years (Table 3).

## Discussion

Investment in a variety of small-scale projects spread the active-living message broadly and provided access to a variety of funding sources. Community leaders from

schools, businesses, healthcare settings, and government offices have recognized the benefits of Project U-Turn (e.g., student safety, community health awareness, attractive built environment). At the same time, the small Fitness Council staff struggled to manage the variety of small-scale projects, and the Task Force's vision may have been diminished by trying to represent too many perspectives and programs at once.

Yet, the investment in partnership and programs paid off in policy and environmental changes in Jackson. The partnership and programs raised community awareness of active living principles, making bike lanes, rail-trails, and sidewalk improvements more common terms in public dialogue. The ArtsWalk project provided an excellent example. The Task Force distributed information on the benefits of this section of urban trail and rallied community support when the project was threatened. This once quietly progressing project has now been championed by the arts district, economic development groups, and river and trail advocates. Newspaper editorials supported the project, and more than 40 employers wrote letters supporting the project as a way to attract new businesses and employees.

### Lessons Learned

Maintaining long-term, active participation in the Task Force has proved difficult. As the lead agency, the Fitness Council took on the majority of program operations. In retrospect, their limited resources may have been better utilized by getting Task Force partners to contribute and coordinate programmatic efforts with their existing staff, resources, and services.

Similarly, the Fitness Council did not have the resources to address continuous turnover in the Student Coalition, as youth programs require an ongoing recruitment mechanism. Future youth engagement will focus on collaborating with existing youth groups instead of using valuable lead agency resources to recreate these mechanisms.

Working with schools presented a similar challenge. Safe Routes required the time and attention of school administrators, staff, and parents. In particular, Walking School Bus routes depended on a strong volunteer effort from within the school. In [Figure 1](#), Jackson Arts and Technology Academy shows a much higher level of walking than other schools because the staff and parents were more involved in Safe Routes activities such as the Walking School Bus. Communities interested in school-based programs should plan considerable resources in getting school staff and parents invested in the program.

### Next Steps

Moving forward, the Jackson partnership will continue to integrate promotions and programs with policy and infrastructure advocacy. Building on the

Complete Streets resolutions and bike lanes, another ALbD grant will allow the Fitness Council to develop design guidelines and project priorities for nonmotorized transportation projects. Smart Commute Day is expanding to a 4-month program, and the Community Bike Program will expand to promote safe and effective cycling to new audiences. Funding is not secure, but the Fitness Council has established itself as an effective leader for active living in the community. It is well positioned to continue as lead agency as active living projects continue to develop in Jackson.

### Support Networks

The support network among the 25 ALbD communities continues to be a great asset in carrying the active living work beyond the grant period. Many of the ideas for programs, policies, physical projects, and promotions in Jackson came from ALbD workshops, conferences, or direct communication with other ALbD partnerships. The Jackson Complete Streets resolutions were based on language provided by the Cleveland partnership. The billboard campaign was suggested by the Omaha partnership, and the Task Force borrowed Walking School Bus materials from Columbia, Missouri. These examples highlight the support from the ALbD National Office and relationships among communities, both of which were essential to the success of Project U-Turn.

### Conclusion

The integrated approach to the 5P model taken by Project U-Turn was effective in increasing the number of trips made by biking and walking. More importantly, the project demonstrates the spiraling impact of programs, promotions, policy, and physical projects when considered as parts of a complete project. Additionally, the members of the Task Force were the driving force behind each of these areas. Programs that had strong support from Task Force members were generally successful. Efforts tended to fail when they were not supported by partners, either because of a lack of interest or because the necessary agency was not represented in the Task Force. The lead agency was critical to the project, but likely should have focused more energy on strengthening the Task Force and less effort on completing this partnership's work.

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