



## **Davidson walked before it was cool**

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By [Katie Orlando](#)

Recognition is flooding Davidson this fall.

Most recently, the Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center named Davidson one of 10 pedestrian-friendly communities in the county. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention awarded Davidson \$350,000 to perform Health Impact Assessments over the next three years, along with only five other agencies nationwide. A Carolina Thread Trail grant will expand the Randall-Kincaid Greenway.

But all of this recognition is coming after decades of planning a pedestrian-friendly, community-oriented town.

Davidson's former town boards may not have intended to build a healthy town, but their efforts have created what is becoming the model for a small, health-conscious town, and other cities are taking note.

### **Back to the Beginning**

In the early 1990s, Davidson leaders held a series of general planning meetings to learn what citizens loved about Davidson, what they wanted to protect and what they wanted to change, Commissioner Margo Williams said.

"They liked our big trees. They liked being able to walk around town and know one another, and be involved with town programs and opportunities and events," Williams said.

The board learned that they needed to implement planning conducive to safe walking. That meant more sidewalks and bicycle lanes and not widening streets.

They adopted the current planning ordinance in 1995.

"Who we are, intrinsically, at the core, is a pre-World War II village that grew organically around a grid of streets and around an identifiable, lively, urban core," Williams said. "So we tried to create planning that reflected who we are and, as we grew, who we wished to become."

Planning Manager Lauren Blackburn came to Davidson in 2006. The planning ordinance largely guides the work she does.

The board of the early '90s wanted to emulate what they already had in downtown Davidson as residents flocked to the north Mecklenburg town, which was "building types that were on the street that invited public interaction with the buildings, wide sidewalks and street trees," Blackburn said.

Once the town decided how they wanted to grow, planning guided new development.

## **Building a healthy town**

Every new development in Davidson must have sidewalks on both sides of the street. Narrow streets keep driving speeds low. Considerations for main streets like Concord Road involved innovative ideas including plenty of space for cars, pedestrians, public transportation and bicycle lanes, Blackburn said. The planning ordinance mandates there must be a park within one-quarter mile of every new home built in Davidson.

Land-use intensity is also regulated to avoid sprawl and huge parking lots separating businesses that encourage people to drive between destinations. Instead, downtown businesses are oriented toward to the sidewalk, with inviting design standards and shared parking.

Some of this healthy planning came even earlier than the conversations of the 1990s.

“I am grateful to the town board of the 1970s who prohibited drive-thrus,” like those commonly seen at fast-food restaurants, Williams said.

Idling cars in drive-thru lines harm the environment, and their driveway designs are unfriendly to bikers and walkers.

## **Planning for health**

Early planning conversations didn't involve health.

In January 2010, Williams read a report from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, “Healthy Places, Healthy People,” about healthy options like sidewalks and architecture that encourages community.

“I was struck by how similar it was to what we had tried to create in our planning ordinance. We just never put the word health on it,” Williams said. “But in truth, if we are successful in implementing our planning, we will create health for our citizens.”

Realizing that their planning reflected health, Williams proposed to the town board that there might be partners in foundations that could help the town expand on projects like greenways, open spaces and more bike paths.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Health Impact Assessment grant was just the thing to help Davidson measure and improve their existing health initiatives.

With obesity affecting 34 percent of adults and 17 percent of children in America, according to the Centers for Disease and Prevention, municipalities are starting to look at how they can solve this growing health epidemic. Williams said this problem will be solved where people live, and towns will be the ones providing the resources to get people active.

“Who regulates where you have places, period? Other than your personal gym and your home, or any other private facility, it's the planning community,” Blackburn said.

Davidson has a lot of these places, but what makes people use them?

“Having a destination worth going to helps a lot,” Blackburn said. “You obviously have to have the means of getting there – bike paths, sidewalks, etc. But you've got to have something to get to that's safe. ... Something that has the amenities that meet your needs: bike racks, etc, and something that's worth the effort to get to.”

Davidson wants connected streets and sidewalks so residents can walk to downtown, stores, work and school.

The Parks and Recreation department, Blackburn says, will play a role in encouraging outdoor activity. Healthy Living and Wellness Supervisor Leslie Willis focuses on the programming side of health in

Davidson. She is currently working to re-establish a walk-to-school program.

In the past, a similar program marked certain routes that children could walk to school. Parents could drop off kids that didn't live near these paths at entrances where they would check in and walk to school. This new program, Willis said, may involve walking school buses, with a parent at the front and back of a neighborhood group walking together.

Parks and Recreation classes also encourage activity and healthy eating. On Nov. 14, a nutrition class will teach people how to read food labels and navigate the grocery store.

Willis is also working on a family adventure race for Spring 2012 to get families active together and using outdoor town spaces.

### **Health Impact Assessments**

The recent grant to measure the effect of programs, policies and developments on community health is another step in making Davidson a model for healthy, connected communities. These assessments will help Davidson measure its success, improve programs and educate neighbors with two health seminars per year.

"We know that the built environment should have a positive impact. We want to help demonstrate that, not only for ourselves so we can grow to improve our policies but also for the national stage, other small towns," Blackburn said. "We want to make sure that we're doing the best thing we can for our citizens and making sure that we're staying with the trends, the technology, the modes of transportation."

Instead of just telling other towns that Davidson has sidewalks and parks, Health Impact Assessments will demonstrate how these built environments work.

A group of University of North Carolina, Charlotte students spent a semester studying Davidson. They published a book, "Small Town Fit: Healthy People, Places, and Policies," presenting Davidson as a model of healthy community planning. The book highlights the prohibition of widened streets and drive-thru windows, walker- and biker-friendly design and the availability of fresh, local food at the Davidson Farmers' Market. Health Impact Assessments will support the students' conclusions and Davidson's pride, giving other towns better guidelines and ideas of how to encourage health and activity.

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