MU Extension Specialists Knowledgeable about Environment Assessments

MU Extension specialists are available to assist communities in conducting assessments of various aspects of the community environment. These assessments of aspects such as the built environment, nutrition environment, walkability and bikeability can be used in both urban and rural communities. They generate valuable information in the decision making process to bring about changes to policies and the environment. This newsletter story features MU Extension specialists answering questions about environment assessments and assessment tools.

Dale Brigham is an MU Extension state specialist in Nutrition and Exercise Physiology and co-directs the MU Extension Healthy Lifestyle Initiative. He has experience in the field of nutrition and exercise physiology as a professor, laboratory researcher, clinical practitioner and public health worker. He has worked in healthcare, university and government settings. Dale also attended a training at the Built Environment Assessment Training Institute and agreed to answer some questions about built environment assessments.

What is a built environment assessment tool? Built environment assessment tools are checklists or surveys that are used to evaluate the physical activity aspects (and less typically, healthy food availability aspects) of a street, neighborhood, or community.


(continued on page 2)
Why would conducting a built environment assessment be beneficial for MFH grantees and others involved in healthy eating active living initiatives? Built environment assessments are a great way to involve stakeholders and partners in looking at their streets, neighborhoods, and communities in a new way. They make good team projects, and the process and the results of the assessments tend to open the eyes of those persons involved and lead to further engagement.

When should a community conduct a built environment assessment? Anytime is a good time, but relatively early in the planning stages of a project is ideal.

How do built environment assessment tools differ if they are used in rural rather than urban communities? There are recently developed tools specific to rural environments: www.activelivingresearch.org/node/11947. The specific features and the density of features of rural environments differ from urban and suburban environments.

How can MU Extension specialists assist grantees in conducting a built environment assessment? Dale Brigham, State Nutrition and Fitness Specialist, will be the key contact for assisting grantees. E-mail him at brighamd@missouri.edu. The Active Living Research website (www.activelivingresearch.org) is also a great resource for learning about built environment assessments.

What training is required to be able to assist communities in conducting built environment assessments? Generally, the main technical assistance is in helping grantees find the right tool(s), and then helping the grantees understand how to use the selected tool(s). Again, the Active Living Research website (www.activelivingresearch.org) is a great resource for learning about built environment assessments. The Built Environment Assessment Training Institute offers a week-long professional training course annually (www.med.upenn.edu/beat/index.shtml).

(continued on page 3)
Have you assisted communities in conducting any built environment assessments? If so, what kind of changes, if any, did the community make after conducting the assessment? Ralls County Healthy Lifestyle Initiative was interested in doing built environment assessments as part of a 4-H technology project, and I assisted them in finding assessment resources. The information has been integrated into the planning process, but I am not aware of any concrete changes at this time.

Kara Lubischer is an MU Extension regional specialist in Community Development and works in St. Louis City and St. Louis County. Kara has experience in the field of community development working with youth and adults to enhance leadership skills, conducting monthly seminars linking university research to local issues and assisting in the process of community revitalization and infrastructure development, among other things. Most recently she has been involved in the development and opening of a grocery cooperative in an Old North St. Louis neighborhood. Kara has conducted a variety of walkability and bikeability assessments and agreed to answer some questions about these kinds of assessments. Contact Kara at lubischerk@missouri.edu or 314-516-6392.

**What is a walkability assessment?** A walkability assessment is a tool designed to help community members, stakeholders and elected officials determine whether or not their neighborhood is pedestrian friendly. Walkability assessments can examine a variety of things including sidewalk conditions, street lights, curb cuts and more. Walkability audits can be conducted by anyone – youth, adults, senior citizens, people in wheelchairs.

**What are examples of walkability assessment tools that you use or would recommend using?** There are a wide variety of walkability audits available online. It may be useful to download several different audits and pull from each the questions that you think best fit your community. Walkability audits can be tailored for each community. For example, several years ago I worked with teenagers in an inner-city community to conduct a walkability and bikeability audit of their neighborhood. It was important to the youth that during each audit walk we logged the address of every boarded up house. The high number of boarded up homes in this community made residents feel unsafe. The youth leaders wanted to improve the walkability of their community not only by increasing the number of street lights and improving sidewalk conditions but also by improving the housing conditions. Therefore, we developed our own walkability audit for this community in order to get at the specific issues related to walkability and bikeability in this area. Active Living Research website has examples of walkability and bikeability tools at www.activelivingresources.org/yourcommunity6.php.

**Why would conducting a walkability assessment be beneficial for MFH grantees and others involved in healthy eating active living initiatives?** A walkability assessment would be an extremely beneficial tool for all MFH grantees for several reasons. Since walkability audits can be conducted by anyone, the use of the tool empowers the community to identify challenges within their neighborhood as well as possible solutions.
Such assessments also allow for community members to work closely with elected officials in order to make positive lasting change within their community, change that is reflected in improved health and vitality of their community.

**When should a community conduct a walkability assessment?** A walkability assessment can be conducted at any time during a community project. Ideally, a walkability audit would be completed at different times of the year to factor in weather conditions and how they may impact the walkability of an area. It is also a good idea to conduct an audit at different times of day because conditions may change from day to night.

**How do walkability assessment tools differ if they are used in rural rather than urban communities?** There are a wide variety of walkability audits available online. Each tool can be tailored to the needs of a community. Thus, projects in rural areas can still benefit from the resources online. The greatest difference between urban and rural audits is the questions used in each.

**How can MU Extension specialists assist grantees in conducting a walkability assessment?** MU Extension specialists can assist communities interested in conducting a walkability audit by helping them determine the best questions for their community.

**Have you assisted communities in conducting any walkability assessments? If so, what kind of changes, if any, did the community make after conducting the assessment?** As mentioned earlier, I worked with teen leaders to conduct both a walkability and bikeability audit of their neighborhood. The teens worked with city officials in public safety, highways and public health on this project so that they could come together at the end of the audit and make changes. As a result of the audits and this close working relationship, several changes were made including four new countdown crosswalk signals installed near schools, crosswalks restriped throughout the community, and several problem houses demolished. We also raised money to work with an urban designer to design a community walking and biking map that pointed out the best routes to walk and bike throughout the neighborhood to the library, schools, churches, and grocery stores.

**Nutrition Environment Assessment**
A nutrition environment assessment tool is a questionnaire you can use to determine the health of a community’s environment and policies related to promoting and supporting healthy eating. It provides an assessment of how accessible healthy foods are in the community, in workplaces and in schools. When you assess the food environment, you can use the results to identify strategies that make it easier for community members to choose healthy foods.

(continued on page 5)
If you are working in a rural area, you can conduct an assessment of the community at large. In a city, you can assess selected neighborhoods, worksites, or schools.

Ann Cohen, nutrition specialist with the MU Extension Healthy Lifestyle Initiative team is working with the Michigan Public Health Institute to make their Nutrition Environment Assessment Tool (NEAT) available to Missouri Foundation for Health Healthy and Active Communities grantees. You will be able to use the NEAT questionnaire to gather information in your community and enter the data in their online system. NEAT includes a scorecard of the support factors for healthy eating and a planning section that you can use to reflect on what you have learned in completing the assessment, with suggested next steps based on the assessment results. You can view the NEAT on the Michigan website (www.mihealthtools.org/neat).

For more information about conducting a nutrition environment assessment or using NEAT, contact Ann Cohen at 573-882-2435 or by email at cohena@missouri.edu. She can answer your questions as well as put you in contact with an MU Extension specialist located in your area with expertise in nutrition and health or community development. That specialist can help you plan how to collect the information your community needs for a nutrition assessment as well as assist with the discussion of results, development of an action plan, and engagement of community members in support of changes in policies and the environment.

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