
Active Living by Design as a Political Project

Challenges at Three Levels

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As the Active Living by Design (ALbD) program envisioned them, changes in the built environment (physical projects) that encouraged physical activity as part of routine daily life came about because of innovations in preparation, partnership, programming, promotions, and policy.¹ The articles, which represent case studies in this supplement²⁻¹⁶ to the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* depict in enlightening detail how 15 communities moved along this strategic continuum, but say little about another “P,” politics. This inattention is not surprising: Politics was not an explicit part of their formal mission. Nonetheless, the refinement and deployment of political skill is integral to attaining the goals toward which the five ALbD “P’s” aim.

The quest for health promoting changes in the built environment proceeds in a cultural and institutional context that can sometimes raise steep hurdles for reformers. Business as usual in many American communities supports zoning rules that can discourage mixed uses and density; provide powerful incentives to develop sprawling “communities”; give little priority to biking and walking; encourage school siting that presupposes students arriving by bus or car; and sustain many other patterns that blend public power and private prerogatives so that built environments are at odds with active living. The cultural underpinnings of these policy patterns—for example, the quest for big houses on large lots, and the equation of automobiles with mobility and of free-wheeling development with local prosperity—run deep. Such potent forces usually change incrementally, and achieving those changes is an inescapably political project.

In the case studies presented in this supplement, we find that the accomplishments of the ALbD partnerships reveal political struggles and gains at three distinct levels.

The Politics of Local Coalitions

Active Living by Design leaders sought to bring into coalitions such disparate but partly overlapping ingredients as the cycling community; committed walkers; public health professionals who understand the importance of the built environment as a determinant of health; New

Urbanists; Smart Growth advocates; environmentalists pressing to reduce pollution and preserve green space; activists who see mixed-land use as a vehicle to integrate citizens of various races, ethnicities, and classes; and voluntary associations, often small and financially shaky, that seek to protect parks, trails, and waterways. Although each pursues mainly its own agenda detached from (and sometimes in conflict with) the others, these local organizations, movements, and enthusiasts have considerable untapped power that manifests itself politically in the ALbD communities that identified collective interests and constructed coherent agenda.

Creating these ALbD partnerships did not happen without considerable focused attention. For organizations that lack the time, funds, and staff to concert action among their peers, the ALbD grant was a collective good of considerable value. The award supplied time, funds, and staff dedicated to canvassing the local interest groups and guiding their members toward a practical plan of action. ALbD staff helped to move beyond coalition building toward coordination by bringing forward for discussion overlapping elements of group agendas that helped cultivate a united political front. Finally, these staff complemented coalition and coordination with communication, that is, working with public relations experts and local media to develop the ALbD agenda into messages that drew the attention of audiences in larger communities and hence the attention of their appointed and elected officials.

The Labyrinth of Government Authority

To advance their agendas, the ALbD partnerships simultaneously had to deal with a second political sphere, that of the large and intimidating mix of local and county (and sometimes state and federal) agencies that enforce laws and regulations governing the built environment. Plans to build and extend bike paths, improve sidewalks, connect trails, develop safe routes to school, encourage mixed and dense development patterns, and change the character of urban communities required the approval of some combination of city planners, traffic engineers, parks and recreation officials, zoning code specialists, school systems, environmental protectors, transportation and utility commissions, and, in some cases, state and federal agencies. In many ALbD communities, some of these local and county agencies were integral to the ALbD partnership and

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even took the role of lead agency. Notwithstanding this representation of agencies in ALbD coalitions, a close reading of the case studies reveals other important bureaucratic players that the partners were obliged to try to influence.

Penetrating and navigating this dense institutional terrain were challenging tasks indeed. Authority to broaden sidewalks or to plant trees often required changes in subdivision ordinances under the control of committees of planners (reluctant to upset developers) and engineers (resolved to move traffic efficiently and safely). These planners and engineers often work within the constraints of overarching master plans and, sometimes, regulations imposed by higher levels of government. Tracking institutional divisions of labor; identifying agency officials with both influence and interest in the ALbD agenda; developing a case for change that would pass agency muster; articulating that case in meeting after meeting (both public and private); debating and cajoling anxious developers and residents; scanning the state and federal horizon for complementary efforts; and parsing the confounding directives all took time, patience, and capacity. The maze of bureaucratic precincts and processes give structure and shape to the building and rebuilding of community and regional environments. ALbD coalitions had no choice but to enter the labyrinth and grope their way along the learning curve.

Elected Officials—the Political Pros and Cons of ALbD

Mastery of bureaucratic essentials, although surely necessary, was, in many cases, insufficient to achieve hoped for policy change. Such change often required support from a third sphere, elected political leaders—mayors, county commissioners, school board members, and more. ALbD advocates sought political champions among officials who generally see both pros and cons in active living projects. The pursuit of the programs' goals proceeded amid powerful constraints of political economy. Growth—even, perhaps especially, development that sprawls—means business, jobs, tax base, and revenues. To many constituents, density connotes blocked views, clogged traffic, downsized dwellings, annoying bustle, and suspicious characters. School board members and the superintendents accountable to them want to build schools where access (drop off and pick up by car or bus) is easy and land is cheap.

These officials and some of their constituents also hoped to cut traffic congestion and reduce dependence on cars. They recognized the aesthetic and cultural benefits of mixed-use neighborhoods, and, not the least important, promoted the benefits of physical activity. Any but the most dogmatic politician can see these issues in two (or more) ways; the practical challenge is balancing, harmonizing, and trading off

among diverse community aspirations. When active-living advocates, in private groups and public bodies, register intense preferences, translate them from wish lists into meticulous proposals and plans, engage with city agencies to learn the formal and informal ropes and rules of the policy game, and make plain to elected office holders that they are prepared to reward their friends with political resources including, but not limited to, their votes, they build power. It is this political power that provides the gradual counter-balance to local interests that prefer business as usual and could leave the built environment on its current trajectory. The ALbD partnerships were a new source of countervailing political power. Their power did not guarantee change in policies to make the built environment more hospitable to active living, but without it, policy change had little chance to emerge and take root.

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