

Community

Introduction

Community is generally defined as a group of people living within the same area, especially a town, city, county, or state. For the purposes of comprehensive planning, the community is the land and people within particular municipal boundaries that will be affected by the goals and objectives of the comprehensive plan.

This new section of the Town's Comprehensive Plan will provide the residents and local government with a guide to improve quality of life and overall well-being for all North Smithfield residents and visitors through physical development and creative placemaking. Physical development refers to the physical growth of the community, whether implementing new development projects, or revitalizing existing buildings and spaces within the community. Placemaking is an interdisciplinary approach to planning, designing, and managing public spaces, capitalizing on the community's assets, interests, and vision to create public spaces that promote residents' health, happiness, and well-being.

Many comprehensive plan updates now include a chapter concerning community and public health because in the last few years planners and public health officials have realized the impact the built environment has on the health and well-being of community residents. There has been a recent interest in community design for improving the physical and mental health of residents, and many localities have begun adopting goals and policies within their plans supporting public health and healthier lifestyles.

Recreational activities, transportation options, access to healthy food, and access to healthcare are important aspects of achieving public health within a community. Cities and towns with a strong sense of community encourage the implementation of plans that include improvement of walking and bicycling infrastructure, compact development, local food activities, community involvement, and awareness of public health. North Smithfield is a town full of residents already working towards building community and promoting public health. Activities such as Clean and Green Day, the summer Sunday concert series, and Pumpkin Fest, changes in the Town zoning ordinance to promote appropriately scaled farms and farm operations, and Town Bike Maps 1

and 2 are great examples of this in Town. This plan builds on those existing activities and encourages residents and government officials to continue making North Smithfield a safe, healthy, and vibrant place to live.

In 1986, McMillan and Chavis defined a sense of community as the “feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together.”

A municipality with a strong sense of community is also one with strong social cohesion, or one that is actively developing shared values and equal opportunity based on trust and reciprocity among residents. In 2000, Regina Berger-Schmitt suggested that a socially cohesive community is one where residents are committed to reducing disparities, inequalities, and social exclusion, while strengthening social relations, interactions, and ties.

An important aspect of social cohesion and a sense of community, where all community members are working towards common goals, is combining community-level strategies with individual-level strategies for improving health, happiness, and well-being. Where individual strategies focus on imparting knowledge to individuals surrounding specific topics like healthy diet and exercise, community-level strategies reach larger populations within the community and put the knowledge from individual-level strategies into broader action. Individual-level strategies seek to change individual behavior, while community-level strategies seek to create a specific community culture surrounding a broad issue such as public health. For example, an individual can be taught that eating fast food and highly processed foods is bad for his or her health (an individual-level strategy), and a city or town can implement community-wide strategies to limit the number of fast food outlets and increase the availability of fresh, healthy alternatives. This combines individual-level and community-level strategies to increase overall public health with the ultimate goal of reducing overweight and obesity within the entire community while providing greater access to healthy food options.

Local government is a crucial player in ensuring the implementation of new projects within a community, but the most important players are the residents themselves. Community engagement opportunities allow residents to voice opinions and come up with community-wide strategies that promote goals and visions agreed upon by community residents. Once residents

decide on a vision for the future, it is up to public officials to help the community achieve that vision.

History

North Smithfield was originally part of Smithfield, RI, which was founded as a farming community in the early 17th century. North Smithfield was incorporated in its current form in 1871. Throughout the early 1800s, industrialists and entrepreneurs settled in the area to capitalize on the rich natural resources, most importantly the Blackstone and Branch Rivers, and developed various villages. It was here in North Smithfield that the first planned mill village in the United States, known as Slatersville, was developed. Each village (Forestdale, Primrose, Waterford, Branch Village, Union Village, Park Square, and Slatersville) was developed as a result of specific industries and residents, with a unique identity and community character.

Today, North Smithfield is a rural, mostly residential community that combines traditional small town New England charm with modern-day development patterns of retail and services, especially along the town's arterial and collector streets. Automobile dependence, highway retail development, and a more regional economy have given rise to more spread-out residential and commercial developments, allowing individuals to live further from employment, retail and other service centers. This pattern of development has led to less compact communities, especially in rural areas, which hinders the ability of residents to form a sense of community based on physical town boundaries. This sort of development also has a serious impact on the health and well-being of the people of the community. More trips taken by car mean fewer taken by walking, biking, or public transit, and can contribute to higher incidence of overweight and obesity which, in turn, leads to higher risk of chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.

The Town of North Smithfield is in a unique position to reclaim its traditional identity through community development and creative placemaking, especially through the update of the Comprehensive Plan. The Town can also use the Plan to improve public health, quality of life, and well-being. This chapter will guide North Smithfield residents and local government through the process of identifying important assets of the community, and how to use those assets to promote a greater sense of community within the town.

Goals, Policies, and Actions

Goal 1: Foster a greater sense of community through physical development and creative placemaking.

Policy 1: Use physical development projects to create places that will serve all members of the community.

Action 1: Seek local, state, and federal funding opportunities to combine services and the locations of those services to better serve community residents and visitors.

Action 2: Pursue development projects that seek to maintain rural character and small town New England charm.

Policy 2: Develop a Gateway Plan for major entry points into the town and individual villages.

Action 1: Identify the areas where residents and visitors are most likely to enter the town and where gateway signs will be most visible.

Action 2: Determine signage and landscape designs for gateways that promote and preserve the rural small town character of North Smithfield.

Policy 3: Better utilize town assets to promote a sense of community for all residents.

Action 1: Identify town assets that are underutilized as gathering places where residents and visitors can meet up for social events or unexpected encounters with one another.

Action 2: Develop a Town Placemaking Plan through a community engagement process that will guide the implementation of ideas to encourage residents and visitors to use underutilized public spaces.

Goal 2: Enhance quality of life for all residents through the improvement of public health.

Policy 1: Establish a local or regional coalition or alliance for public health that is accountable for ensuring the long-term public health of town residents.

Action 1: Develop and implement a Community Health Improvement Plan that is updated annually.

Action 2: Implement Health Impact Assessments (HIAs) into projects that could heavily impact vulnerable population groups, major transportation routes, and others that relate directly to public health outcomes.

Policy 2: Provide recreational opportunities for residents across all generations.

Action 1: Work with the Parks and Recreation Department to develop athletic programs for adults as well as children of all ages.

Policy 3: Encourage walking and bicycling as active transportation options as well as recreational opportunities.

Action 1: Develop a town-wide Bicycling and Pedestrian Plan to improve bicycling and walking infrastructure along popular routes between employment, retail and other service centers.

Action 2: Discuss the feasibility of a Complete Streets Plan to provide residents with more transportation options.

Action 3: Work with state, regional, and federal departments to initiate a Safe Routes to School program.

Policy 4: Provide local, comprehensive health services that meet the needs of the aging population as well as all other population groups.

Action 1: Consider the creation of a Town Committee on Aging to ensure all services and needs of the aging population are adequately provided.

Action 2: Work with the RI Department of Health to study the need for a comprehensive medical home.

Goal 3: Promote public health and a sense of community through local food initiatives.

Policy 1: Encourage the development of a local community food system.

Action 1: Work with local farmers to facilitate new marketing opportunities.

Action 2: Work with the school superintendent's office to promote school gardens in all town schools.

Physical Development and Creative Placemaking

Physical Development

A concrete example of the Town's commitment to community building through physical development is the redevelopment of the Kendall Dean School building, located at 83 Green Street near some of the oldest residences of the town. The building was constructed during the 1930s as part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) program, and was designed in the Neo-Classical architectural style common to many WPA projects. The building is currently in the National Historic District as a contributing structure, and is included in the Local Historic District as well.

Currently, the offices and services that residents of North Smithfield need on a regular basis are located in two buildings that are located four miles apart. The offices of the Town Administrator, Finance, and Planning are located in the historic Memorial Town Hall, while the Town Clerk, Assessor, Tax Collector, and Building Inspector are located in the Town Hall Annex. The North Smithfield School Department is currently the only tenant in the Kendall Dean School.

The Town is planning a renovation and rehabilitation of the Kendall Dean School in the near future that would enhance the building and provide residents better access to Town services. Through the renovation and rehabilitation of the building, the Town's various offices and services will be relocated to one single location inside the school building. As a result, residents will be able to easily find the offices they need to make inquiries, apply for various licenses, pay taxes, and a myriad of other day to day activities. Various town meetings are already held in the building, and will continue to be held in the updated conference and meeting spaces available when renovations are completed.

While it will be far more convenient to all of North Smithfield's residents to have a Town Hall with all local government offices and services in one location, the rehabilitation and renovation of Kendall Dean will provide a place where community members can meet, be involved in local government, and even attend social events. Social events may include movie nights with discussion afterwards during the winter months or on nights of inclement weather, when it is impossible to have movie nights on the Village Green or in Pacheco Park. Walls within the

building can be used for art exhibits featuring local artists and students. The town could host community picnics, game nights, and other events that promote community building. While simple, these kinds of events can promote what the Coalition of Healthy Cities and Communities describe as community inclusiveness, a significant step in improving residents' quality of life by providing them with a stronger sense of community and social cohesion.

This redevelopment of the Kendall Dean School will ensure that the building continues to contribute to the small New England village charm of the Slatersville Historic District and the Town of North Smithfield, while providing opportunities for residents to come together and forge new, stronger relationships with one another.

Placemaking

According to Project for Public Places, a nonprofit planning, design and education organization, placemaking refers to the “collaborative process by which we can shape our public realm in order to maximize shared value...by capitalizing on a local community’s assets, inspiration, and potential, resulting in the creation of quality public spaces that contribute to people’s health, happiness, and well-being.” Through this process, residents can identify those places that are important to the character and identity of the community as a whole, ways to make the places more usable and attractive, and ultimately create a more vibrant, welcoming and inviting network of public space. A Town Placemaking Plan promotes a comprehensive understanding of these physical assets within the community, and provides strategies to best utilize them. The process of developing a Placemaking Plan involves a public visioning session where community members determine what the future of the town will look like physically, public meetings where residents can provide specific input and feedback on strategies and propose projects, and direct work with key community stakeholders such as historical societies, neighborhood organizations, and community development organizations, among others.

There are numerous spaces within North Smithfield that contribute to the small town New England charm and community character of the area. A few of these include the Village Green and Congregational Church, North Smithfield Public Library, Slatersville Granite Commercial Blocks, and various playgrounds and athletic facilities, among others. The potential of these areas to promote a sense of community through creative placemaking is significant.

Gateways and Wayfinding

Placemaking through gateways and wayfinding signs are relatively inexpensive yet impactful ways to show community pride and promote a unique identity. A gateway is a means of access or entry to a place, and can provide the first impression that community residents want visitors to feel when they arrive. Gateways also promote roadway beautification projects and provide an opportunity for a community to pursue public art projects and natural resource protection, much like the current Adopt-A-Spot program. North Smithfield's main gateway points are:

- RI Route 146 at the MA/RI border
- RI Route 146 at the I-295 Interchange
- Providence Pike on the town's southern border
- RI Route 146A at the Route 104 split into Woonsocket
- RI Route 102 at Slatersville Reservoirs on the town's western border

These are the areas where the most traffic is likely to come into and out of North Smithfield, making them ideal spots for gateway improvements and beautification efforts. Gateways can be a public or private effort, or a combination of both. The Town can identify the most ideal locations for gateways, and invite private organizations or corporations to adopt the area for landscaping and signage improvements. Individual village areas could also adopt gateway plans to promote the unique identity and character of each village throughout town.

Wayfinding is defined as knowing where one is in a city or town, where the desired location is, and the best route to get to that final destination from the current location. Wayfinding signs are important especially for new visitors in town, and identify landmarks and points of interest while providing directional information to help orient visitors and new residents. North Smithfield is full of rich history, natural resources and unique character both on its own and as part of the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor. Located on the town website, visitors and residents can find a map of a short walking tour of some of the most historic areas of Slatersville. Wayfinding signs to guide visitors and residents through the historic tour would be beneficial, and the areas included can become interactive nodes for families and individuals alike. The

historic tour has great potential to be expanded into more of the historic local villages and include other sites such as Wright's Dairy that are historically significant throughout North Smithfield.

Public Health

Many factors influence individual and public health. According to the World Health Organization, "public health refers to all organized measures (whether public or private) to prevent disease, promote health, and prolong life among the population as a whole." Measures to improve public health should include goals and objectives that reach all members of a community, regardless of socioeconomic status, gender, age, or any other characteristic. The Town may benefit from studying the feasibility of a comprehensive medical home where medical, dental, and mental health services are combined in a single location. A great local example of a comprehensive medical home is WellOne, with locations in Pascoag, Foster, and North Kingstown. WellOne provides healthcare regardless of ability to pay, an important aspect of health for low-income families and others, especially seniors, on fixed incomes. Services provided at WellOne locations include pediatric care, family medicine, women's health, dental care, behavioral health, laboratory testing, pharmacy programs, family services, and case management services. The main populations that would benefit from such a facility are the older age groups who may be unable to transport themselves to multiple offices, or lower income populations who rely on public or other means of transportation to attend health service appointments.

The biggest public health challenge planners and health professionals are facing, especially in rural areas, is the rate of overweight and obesity. Overweight and obesity lead to higher risk of chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and many more. The following sections provide opportunities for the community of North Smithfield to engage in public health initiatives that can reach all sectors of the population, improve community health and well-being, and reduce the risk of chronic disease.

Local or Regional Coalition for Public Health

Town residents would benefit from a local or regional coalition for public health and the implementation of community health assessments (CHAs) and a Community Health

Improvement Plan (CHIP). An ideal CHA includes information about a specific community regarding risk factors, quality of life, mortality, morbidity, community assets, social determinants of health and equity, and information on the essential services provided by the public health system. Community health improvement plans (CHIPs) use the information and data gathered in the CHA to inform efforts of the local community to address public health issues. The purpose of the CHIP is to define a vision for the health of a community, and develop policies and actions that target health promotion efforts within the community. The Town of North Smithfield can collaborate with surrounding towns to develop a regional CHIP modeled on the Greater Worcester Region Community Health Improvement Plan, which covers six municipalities within central Massachusetts.

A coalition of public health would also be responsible for implementing health impact assessments (HIAs), which identify the health consequences of plans, projects, and policies that are traditionally considered outside the realm of health. HIAs measure public health impacts such as racial or socioeconomic segregation, employment, schooling, or income, among other factors. Implementing HIAs into the policy and project decision making process can contribute to the Town's social cohesion, as community engagement and capacity building are vital to HIAs. Ensuring participation from multiple stakeholders, including residents, creates a culture of inclusion and equity across all sectors of the population in North Smithfield.

The purpose of an HIA is to translate health effects research to inform policy and project discussions. The World Health Organization has identified four core values of the HIA process: 1) Democracy: stakeholder engagement to build community support and public buy-in for new projects or policies, and build collaboration between multiple sectors; 2) Equity: ensuring the reduction of social inequalities in health as a central concern in policy making and project approval; 3) Sustainability: HIAs should take into consideration both short- and long-term health impacts, because a project will not be sustainable if it negatively impacts the health of any population group; 4) Ethical use of evidence: HIAs should utilize quantitative and qualitative evidence where appropriate, and evidence should be as comprehensive as possible. While useful and invaluable, HIAs may not be necessary for every project. It would be up to the public health coalition and the Planning Board to determine whether or not an HIA is appropriate for a proposed project or policy update.

Recreation

Goals and policies for recreation opportunities in the town are discussed more in depth in the Open Space and Recreation chapter of this Plan. However, this section focuses on the community, rather than individual, benefits of recreation opportunities. North Smithfield provides numerous opportunities for recreation with its abundance of walking and biking trails, parks and playgrounds. There are several opportunities for organized sports for children and young adults through the Parks and Recreation Department and local schools.

The creation of adult-league sports and recreation teams would reach more members of the town, and promote life-long recreation opportunities as well as community building activities. Often, individuals find it easier to participate in recreational activities when involved with a group of people who share the same interest. It can create a sense of belonging amongst participants, a crucial aspect of community building and involvement. Life-long group recreational activities lead to individual physical and mental health, as well as improved public health as more members of the community become involved and encourage each other to remain active and choose healthier lifestyles. Physical activity, combined with a healthy diet, has been linked to significant decreases in obesity and the risk of diabetes. A community that values participation in physical activity opportunities is healthier physically and mentally.

Active Transportation

Transportation and circulation are discussed in detail in the Circulation chapter of this Plan. However, it is important for community members to understand the difference between traditional transportation methods (e.g. automobile transportation) and active transportation methods (e.g. walking and bicycling). Until very recently, walking and bicycling were considered recreational activities more so than transportation modes. Due to automobile dependence and modern development patterns, walking and bicycling have become unattractive methods of transportation. Roads can be unsafe for pedestrians and cyclists, especially if travel lanes are wide, speed limits are high, and shoulders contain sand and debris.

Using a personal vehicle is often a convenient and quick way to run errands, to get to work, or attend various events. It also promotes less active lifestyles, especially when individuals live far from places of employment and spend hours commuting to and from work each week.

Active transportation is not only good for individual health but promotes environmental sustainability, public health and well-being through active lifestyles. Studies documenting the health effects of driving versus active modes of transportation are abundant, and planners and public health officials are beginning to promote active transportation as part of a healthy, active lifestyle to improve overall health. Walking and bicycling, especially for short trips, can significantly reduce air pollution and promote weight loss. It is important for the Town to address public health through the creation of walking and bicycling infrastructure as more than just recreation, but also as transportation.

A comprehensive Bicycling and Pedestrian Plan will guide the Town in developing safe and attractive systems for active transportation methods for all age groups, abilities, and other population groups. North Smithfield's Bicycling Maps 1 and 2 are valuable resources for the beginning of a town-wide active transportation plan, as each map already highlights suitable bike routes. The Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor has initiated the Blackstone River Bikeway Branch River Spur Bike Route, with the intention of connecting the Slatersville Historic District to the Blackstone River Bikeway with on-street routes. Here, wayfinding signs indicating the bike route, as well as on-street markings such as shared lane bicycle markings (or "sharrows" for short) would be beneficial to cyclists and drivers alike. Wayfinding signs and sharrows are relatively inexpensive cycling infrastructure that can raise drivers' awareness of cyclists on the road, keeping cyclists safe and encouraging more people to use bicycles on the road.

The Town would also benefit from implementing a Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program in combination with local school officials, parents, and students from all grades. The nationwide SRTS movement provides children and adults with the knowledge and confidence to practice active transportation on a daily basis for everyday activities. The program is a catalyst for other pedestrian and bicycling projects because its implementation often requires infrastructure improvements in a relatively short amount of time. This can lead to more projects over a longer period of time.

If taught the benefits of walking and bicycling, as well as proper safety tips from a young age, and if communities have access to safe walking and biking routes, children may be more likely to feel empowered to use active transportation modes over vehicle transportation. As a result,

the younger generations will have a positive impact on the natural environment and on overall public health, and can combat the significant increase in childhood obesity and chronic diseases later in life. A SRTS program could be a crucial aspect of improving public health for the younger age groups of North Smithfield.

The program promotes community building through partnerships between local school and government officials, parents, and children. A SRTS program involves the creation of teams willing to monitor the routes and ensure the safe arrival of children to their schools. It causes drivers to be more aware of their surroundings and promotes driver and pedestrian safety. The increase in walking and biking to school reduces traffic congestion and improves air quality in the vicinity of schools.

To promote alternate transportation methods and safety for all residents, the Town could begin a campaign similar to the City of Newport's Newport Waves. Newport Waves is a city-wide initiative that encourages all street users (pedestrians, drivers, cyclists, etc.) to acknowledge each other with a wave of the hand. It ensures that all individuals on the road are aware of others, regardless of what transportation mode they are using. A similar campaign can promote safety and help build a sense of community as all residents acknowledge each other in a way they may not have before.

Local Food and Healthy Diets

Diet is a crucial aspect of individual health, and access to food within a community can be a determinant of public health. Individual diets are likely to be poor in areas where families and individuals have low access to supermarkets or other food outlets that sell whole, fresh, healthy foods. If a community has a high number of convenience stores and fast food retailers, it is likely that overweight, obesity, and rates of chronic diseases will be higher than in a community with relatively few convenience stores and a higher number of supermarkets and farm stands that sell fresh produce. Combined with fewer recreational activities and transportation choices, low access to healthy foods can become a serious public health concern.

In 2011, the state of Rhode Island adopted a five-year strategic plan, entitled A Vision for Agriculture, to support the economic viability of a statewide local food system. The development of a local food system can lead to economic stability, community inclusiveness,

environmental sustainability, and improvement of public health within local communities and throughout the state. A community with a strong local food system has more access to local products, protects more of its natural resources, is more economically viable, and promotes healthy lifestyle choices and educational opportunities.

A growing sector of the local food system throughout the nation is the development of school gardening programs, especially in elementary schools. School gardening programs are used to teach children lessons in plant science and biology, environmental sustainability, diet and nutrition, and healthy lifestyles. During the 2012-2013 school year, a school garden was created at North Smithfield Elementary School after surveys sent out to parents and families of students garnered significant positive response and support. The garden has been used for educational activities, and the school's new principle will gauge interest in continuing and expanding the garden and its programs during the 2015-2016 school year. The Town could benefit from implementing school garden programs at each North Smithfield school, teaching students important lessons from elementary through their high school years.

By adopting projects and ordinances that protect and promote local farms and farming activities, the Town can be active in supporting a local and even regional food system. Town ordinances allowing local agricultural activities protect local farms and prime farmland from being developed for residential or commercial purposes. Farms and farm activities have sometimes been found to constitute a public nuisance through odor and noise related to agricultural activities, including raising livestock and growing crops. The State of Rhode Island adopted a Right to Farm Act, which protects such activities from nuisance cases. Town ordinances further protect agricultural activities from such cases, and can promote environmental sustainability, economic development, tourism, and healthy communities.

Before it was incorporated as North Smithfield, the local area was settled largely as farming communities, and still maintains much of that character. Wright's Dairy Farm and Goodwin Brothers Farm Stand are two important examples of agricultural businesses that are important to the health and economy of North Smithfield. These and other farm operations should be encouraged and protected to ensure a healthier, more inclusive community throughout the future.

Conclusion

North Smithfield is a town full of vibrant people with a community-oriented mindset. The foundation for the projects outlined in this section has already been laid. There are many opportunities available for residents to foster a stronger sense of community and social cohesion. From summer concerts to Clean and Green Day, the Town offers many community building opportunities. Taking those further, and incorporating new projects that promote public health through recreation, active transportation, and physical development of public spaces will benefit residents and visitors throughout all stages of their lives.

This comprehensive plan update presents a perfect opportunity for residents from all generations to come together and create a new vision for the Town, where all individuals have equal opportunities to improve their quality of life. Public health through physical development is coming to the forefront of planning and community development. Through its passionate residents, knowledgeable public officials, and focus on community spirit, the Town of North Smithfield is in a unique position to become a pioneer of public health and community planning for the State of Rhode Island.