Melissa Glenn Haber is a mother of three and a volunteer with Shape Up Somerville (SUS). In 2006, she decided to help improve student health at her children’s school. After contacting SUS, Melissa started a Walking School Bus to serve her neighborhood. Today she brings up to seven kids to school and walks three miles every day, helping her remain in good health. But most of all, Melissa commits to the routine because it makes the children happy. Walking gives them time to talk with each other, share experiences and get to know the city. Once they reach school, they are calm and ready to focus on schoolwork.

Melissa’s work with SUS inspired her to organize a School Wellness Committee for the East Somerville Community School. This group includes parents, gym teachers, the school principal, food services staff and members of the Shape Up Somerville Taskforce. Everyone works together to help the school create physical activity opportunities for students.

One challenge has been that the school’s main campus was closed for renovations. This required teachers, families and students to find creative ways to stay active while the school and playgrounds were being rebuilt. The committee discussed local issues, such as play space access and safety, recess games and resources, before-school volunteers in play spaces and ways the school can accommodate student needs.

To this day, Melissa remains a strong advocate for parents and families at the East Somerville Community School. By spearheading the Walking School Bus and coordinating the school’s Walk/Ride Day, she has helped children stay active during the renovation. The pictures of Melissa walking to school with her kids show healthy children and smiling faces—two of the most important benefits that active living has to offer.

**ALbD Project Description**

The Shape Up Somerville (SUS) partnership makes valuable contributions to the active living movement in Somerville. This partnership represents a model for urban communities working to connect diverse, lower-income populations to an existing active living infrastructure. SUS is committed to integrating active living and healthy eating into Somerville residents’ daily lives. This means working to enhance jobs, neighborhood safety, and fair and safe housing. The partnership’s approach uses multiple strategies and relies on collaboration with neighborhood and city partners.

Member diversity is one SUS asset. Partners include the Shape Up Somerville Taskforce, Cambridge Health Alliance, Tufts University, School Food Services, Department of Recreation and Youth, Mayor’s Office, Groundwork Somerville, Green Streets Initiative, Somerville Bike Committee, Friends of the School. This group includes parents, gym teachers, the school principal, food services staff and members of the Shape Up Somerville Taskforce. Everyone works together to help the school create physical activity opportunities for students.

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**Shape Up Somerville:**

**Eat Smart. Play Hard.**
Community Path, Community Corridor Planning Group, Go Green Somerville, Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development, Office of Sustainability and Environment, Parks Department, Institute for Community Health, Massachusetts Farmers Markets, Union Square Main Streets, East Somerville Main Streets and Children in Balance. The newest partners include the Green Streets Initiative and Davis Area Resident/Business Initiative (DARBI).

The partnership’s main goal is to complete the Somerville Community Path and bring its benefits to the lower-income communities in East Somerville. The path will increase physical activity; make active transportation mainstream; and decrease the prevalence of obesity, diabetes and hypertension in the community.

The path bisects Somerville, creating a central pedestrian artery for the community. It also provides a safe route to school for thousands of students, connects commuters to three of Boston’s four subway lines and serves as a linear park that connects lower-income residents with employment opportunities. In the future, the path will connect to a new riverfront park and the existing Charles River path system.

Community Profile and Challenges

Somerville’s population is 77,000, and more than one-third of its residents speak a language other than English. The average income is $23,628, and 12 percent of residents live in poverty. Community assets include its small size; high population density; racial and ethnic diversity; and an infrastructure that includes the Somerville Community Path, Davis Square, and an excellent sidewalk and transit network.

The city of Somerville covers 4.1 square miles. It is considered a walkable city because most streets have sidewalks, and the city has an extensive crossing guard network around schools and city squares for students and commuters. However, Somerville residents still confront major barriers to walking and cycling. Three rail corridors and 14 lanes of highway merge in Somerville en route to Boston. These highways physically separate neighborhoods, and intersections near them are dangerous for pedestrians and cyclists.

Childhood obesity is a major concern for Somerville residents. Among children in grades one to three, 46 percent were identified as at risk for being overweight or obese in 2004. In March, 2005, 29 percent of students in grades four to eight who attended Somerville public schools were obese, and 18 percent were overweight. Data from the Somerville Public School system indicate that Somerville youth do not meet the Healthy People 2010 goals for regular physical activity. Data from the 2002 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System reveal that nearly half of adults in Somerville are overweight or obese.

SUS works consistently with organizations that serve lower-income, minority and ethnic communities. While these organizations do wonderful work in the city, it is difficult to maintain connections with them without funding for ongoing outreach and education. SUS partners often work with organizations that have limited time and money, and the partner-

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One of the best parts of the school day is the daily walk (or bike)
ship struggles to pay them for the services they provide to the community.

**Healthy Eating Somerville**

Neighborhood farmers’ markets are ideal venues for families to purchase fresh, healthy foods. But many markets appeal more to clientele in the middle- and higher-income levels. To address this, the Somerville Healthy Eating by Design partnership decided to create a farmers’ market in Union Square that would be more welcoming to lower-income and immigrant families.

The partnership recognized that in order to be successful, all of their strategies needed to be culturally, linguistically and economically appropriate for community residents. As a result, promotional materials for the farmers’ market, including wayfinding signs, were produced in four languages: Haitian Creole, Portuguese, Spanish and English. Volunteer health advisors also conducted nutrition and food preparation educational sessions at the market in various languages, in addition to offering other family and kid-friendly activities.

Moreover, invitations and an incentive program that contributed an additional $1-$2 for every $5 in benefits spent at the market encouraged WIC and Food Stamp program beneficiaries to attend, as well. Purchasing an electronic benefits transfer machine and developing guidelines for its use at the farmers’ market served as a model for broader dissemination at other markets throughout the City of Somerville and the greater Boston area. The Community Farmers’ Market by Design initiatives resulted in a reported economic impact of more than $500,000 each year for Union Square. Looking ahead, the best practices resulting from the Healthy Eating by Design project have positioned the farmers’ market for continued success. The farmers’ market has also become one of the best known projects of Union Square Main Streets’ neighborhood revitalization efforts.

By earning community and government support for the Community Path extension, SUS helped increase opportunities for car-free commuting. Somerville supports the Green Line transit extension, which will incorporate the path and allow commuters to travel to transit points without cars. By adopting Active Living by Design goals, SUS provided a stronger framework for both existing partners and new members of its team. The SUS partnership received national media attention for a project that demonstrated reduced weight gain rates among school children in the project.

**Impact**

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**Featured Tool**

*Obesity, an academic journal, published research findings highlighting Shape Up Somerville’s successes in reducing childhood obesity through community-based environmental changes.*
area. This media attention, in conjunction with the partnership’s other achievements, positioned SUS to build important relationships with local and city-level policy-makers and stakeholders. The attention also helped SUS leverage additional resources, making SUS a model for using policy changes and environmental improvements to promote active living and healthy eating.

SUS also hosted a Healthy Communities Summit in 2008 for elected leaders in Massachusetts to continue building relationships. It also presented the SUS model to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and welcomed visitors from other media outlets, in addition to municipal, national and international governments.

Accomplishments: ALbD

> Gained support for continued development of the Community Path extension. This support includes 1.5 acres of land for expanding the path, more than $600,000 for construction of a community path park, and a commitment from the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) to incorporate the path into future plans for the MBTA Green Line Subway extension.

> Helped the city of Somerville develop the Safe-START Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety Improvement Plan, which calls for $7.5 million in physical improvements, including crosswalk re-painting and the installation of 50 new bike racks throughout the city.

> Earned city support for SUS, which includes funds for two full-time positions: a Shape Up Somerville coordinator and a bike/pedestrian coordinator.

> Leveraged more than $2.5 million in grants and other direct and in-kind resources. The funding helped to establish two city community gardens, a park connected to the Community Path and a neighborhood farmers’ market. It also attracted significant funding commitments from the state in the form of a five-year health disparities grant.

Accomplishments: HEBd

> Testified to US Department of Agriculture officials on the 2007 reauthorization of Food Stamp programs. Advocated for funding to farmers’ markets to support the purchase and maintenance of wireless Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) machines to make Food Stamp Program EBT benefits and transactions more accessible.

> Conducted two focus groups for English and Portuguese-speaking members of the community to determine culturally- and linguistically-appropriate healthy eating strategies. Utilized information to assess current food access pathways and barriers, and guide the efforts to increase access to healthy foods.

Contact

> City of Somerville Health Department, City Hall Annex, 50 Evergreen Avenue, Somerville, MA 02143  617.625.6600
> http://www.somervillema.gov/Division.cfm?orgunit=SUS

Shape-up Somerville is one of the 25 Active Living by Design community partnerships. Active Living by Design (ALbD) was established in late 2001 as a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF). Located in Chapel Hill and part of the North Carolina Institute for Public Health at the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health, ALbD works with partnerships across the nation to increase routine physical activity and healthy eating through changes in community design. In 2003, ALbD selected 25 diverse community partnerships from a pool of 966 applicants to receive $200,000 and technical assistance over five years. ALbD established Healthy Eating by Design (HEbd), a pilot program that provided 12 of these partnerships an additional $50,000 over 18 months to test approaches to increase access to healthy foods for children in low-income neighborhoods. The ALbD and HEBd community partnerships are located throughout the United States, and project areas range in size from small urban neighborhoods to large rural regions. The program ended in 2008, but many of the community partnerships are continuing their success and are sustaining their work.

Photographs: Courtesy of Active Living By Design

More information on these communities and their accomplishments can be found on the Active Living By Design website (www.activelivingbydesign.org)

* Active Living by Design's Featured Tools are grantee products, tools and publications that were created during the ALbD initiative. Many of these tools have applications beyond the initiative and are being used by other communities. To see or download the featured tool, visit Somerville's page on the ALbD website at activelivingbydesign.org/somerville