



Albert Lea, MN

A Blue Zones Project Case Study

Albert Lea, Minnesota, is a city located about 90 miles south of the Twin Cities with a population of 17,703 as of the 2017 census.

"The Blue Zones Project initiative allowed our community to look at ourselves in a different light and build a better future learning from our past."

Vern Rasmussen, Jr.
Mayor of Albert Lea

"Blue Zones Project helped our community set amazing, aggressive, and achievable strategies that moved the public health agenda further in 10 months than I could have expected in 10 years."

Lois Ahern
Retired Director of Freeborn
County Health

Midwestern city, supported by Blue Zones Project, climbs out of economic crisis with projected lifespans increased by nearly 3 years and economic value by the millions.

Suffering in the face of the 2008 economic downturn, Albert Lea, Minnesota, was determined to transform its situation. Its leaders eagerly teamed up with Blue Zones in 2009, making Albert Lea the first Blue Zones Pilot Project, applying principles from areas around the world where people lived longer, healthier lives. Pleased with the results of the nine-month pilot, Albert Lea has continued on as a Blue Zones Project community addressing built environment, tobacco policy, citizen engagement, and bringing back the downtown. The commitment to well-being has resulted in numerous measurable impacts for Albert Lea, such as:

\$8.6 million—

savings in annual health care costs for employers as a result of a decline in smokers

34th place—

in the Minnesota County Health Rankings (up from 68 out of 87 counties)

2.9 years—

added to lifespans (projected) within one year of participating in the Blue Zones Project

Leading incremental changes and sparking chain reactions

When Blue Zones and Blue Zones Project began working with Albert Lea in 2009 to transform its policies, places, and people, the focus was on helping people move naturally, eat wisely, connect, and have the right outlook—all of which can lead to living longer, better. To make transformation a reality, city leaders and the Blue Zones Project identified key opportunities for impact and sought pledges from businesses and residents.

Community Design Improvements— In 2009, Blue Zones' expert Dan Burden led a walking audit of Albert Lea, identifying ways to create more active and healthy living environments centered around people. A Bike and Pedestrian Master Plan was created that identified areas needing improvement to align with the Complete Streets Policy, which Albert Lea was an early adopter of in 2009.



Armed with inspiration and grant money, Albert Lea created bump outs to ensure safe pedestrian crossings and wider sidewalks that provided space for outdoor dining. A five-mile route that was added around a lake within the city was affectionately named the Blue Zones Walkway by Albert Lea, and it now connects to neighborhoods, parks, downtown and past the local hospital. Stop signs were replaced with traffic lights to maintain a smooth traffic flow. Community message boards were added, and a complete park renovation with amphitheater seating provided additional community gathering space.

The improvements sparked a chain reaction of economic development. New businesses relocated to downtown Albert Lea, and the city initiated a mixed-use project to open room for income-limited housing units and commercial space in the historic downtown area.

Healthier Workplaces: Blue Zones Project offered local businesses the opportunity to become a designated Blue Zones Worksite® by completing an assessment and improvements to increase the long-term well-being of employees, customers, or students. The simple changes were designed to provide lasting benefit to people's physical health, emotional health and social relationships. More than 45 worksites have registered with Blue Zones Project and made varying levels of change, the City of Albert Lea being one.

Blue Zones Project also recommended worksite clinics for some of the larger employers in Albert Lea to increase well-being for employees and reduce healthcare costs. Five of the top 20 partnered together to provide their employees with a dedicated worksite clinic, serving approximately 1,650 employees. Two other area worksites also opened clinics. These efforts resulted in considerable savings.

Healthy Foods: To make healthy food the easy choice for everyone in the community, Blue Zones Project provided guidance on how to offer and bring attention to foods that are more nutritious and tasty.

As a result, one of the local grocery stores implemented changes to its environment, selection of healthy options, and education and promotions to make healthier choices easier for customers. Grab-n-go breakfast and healthy snack cart programs were introduced in various public schools to help children create healthy habits, and they've been highly received by students, educators and parents. An indoor sports arena added healthier options to its concession stand and saw a bump in sales. And the City of Albert Lea has expanded the community garden space 150%, giving residents an opportunity to grow healthy food and socialize in an agricultural environment.

Tobacco Cessation: Starting in 2009, Blue Zones Project began working with the City of Albert Lea to drive policy and environmental changes for a measured reduction in tobacco usage. This included changes for public housing, public parks and events, outdoor dining, as well as partnering with local businesses.

Out of 18,000 residents, 4,140 were smokers in 2010, and success had the potential of reducing health care costs by \$6,000 per year, per smoker. Given the challenge of trying to implement this change and provide a new outlook toward this important public health issue, the city chose to make incremental moves over time, which have made a big impact.





Measurable impacts that have transformed the community

The following progress indicators were reported by the City of Albert Lea in 2018, dating back to 2009 if the data was available.

Impact of Community Design Improvements

- Added more than nine miles of new sidewalks and three miles of bike lanes resulting in a 40% increase in walking and biking since 2014
- More than a dozen businesses relocated to downtown Albert Lea
- Outdoor dining facilities created by three restaurants
- 96% increase in pedestrian traffic from 2014 to 2018
- Ranked above the national and state average for people feeling active and productive according to the July 2014 Gallup-Sharecare Well Being Index¹
- More than \$2.5 million invested in downtown building permits since 2013
- 25% increase in property value in the downtown area, adding \$1 million to tax base
- 48% increase in tourism since 2012
- \$400,000 in revenue and a return of a \$1.2 million property to taxable status expected from the mixed-use downtown development

Impact of Healthier Workplaces

- 300% increase in funds given to the City of Albert Lea by its insurance carrier for its wellness program in 2014, and medical premium increases avoided for city workers in 2014 and 2015
- 40% drop in city worker healthcare costs
- \$128,000 in health care costs saved by a Blue Zones Project worksite within a year of opening a worksite clinic for its 500 employees
- The School District experienced no increase in Health Care Premiums and an 11% decrease in prescription costs as a result of their on-site clinic from 2014-2015



Impact of Healthy Foods Initiative

- Increase sales of 130.35% from the Health Market, 12% from produce, 35.31% from frozen fruit and vegetables, 52.3% from water, and a decrease of 4.66% in soda sales at the Hy-Vee grocery store from 2009 through 2015
- 59% increase in concession sales from 2013 through 2018 at City Arena after healthy options were added
- 60% increase in breakfast participation from 2014 to 2015 in schools where the Grab-n-Go breakfast program was implemented
- 17% increased participation in the Healthy Snack Cart program in the 2014 – 2015 school year

Results of Tobacco Cessation Initiatives

- Tobacco use eliminated at 550 units of public housing, 14 of the top 20 worksites as well as select other businesses, public parks, county fairs, other outdoor events, and outdoor dining
- Decline in smokers from 23% of adult residents in 2009 to 14.7% in 2016
- \$8.6 million savings in annual health care costs for Albert Lea employers from the decline in smokers

Additional Impact

- 2.9 projected years added to participants' lifespan within a year of participating in the Blue Zones Project
- \$1.9 million worth of media impact created from being featured in local and nationwide media, publications, and websites
- 100% of Albert Lea Public Schools are Blue Zones Project Approved
- Obesity rate dropped 1% in 2017, while rates in both the state and nation increased by 1%
- Jump to 34th place in the Minnesota County Health Rankings (previously 68 out of 87 counties)



Grants, Awards, and Recognition

- \$1 million State Bonding grant dedicated to the Downtown Streetscape
- \$256,000 State of Minnesota Small Cities Grant
- \$350,000 sidewalk improvement grant from Minnesota DOT
- \$23,000 SHIP grant for 2017/2018 Safe Routes to School
- \$150,000 Market Rate Housing Grant awarded in 2018 for 12 units of market rate housing on southeast side of town
- 2016 Minnesota Local Government Innovation Award, recognizing the creative ways counties, cities, townships, schools, and Native nations are making Minnesota better
- Ranked fifth in "The top 10 most affordable small towns in the United States that you would actually want to live" by Realtor.com in 2018 (lakes, parks, walking paths and Blue Zones Project listed as "quality of life" indicators)
- Named one of USA Today's 50 Best American Cities to Live in 2018

"We've completely enhanced our quality of life. The impressive outcomes come as a direct result of Blue Zones Project resources and expertise coupled with local volunteers committed to sustaining our changes."

-Chad Adams, Albert Lea City Manager