



BLUE ZONES PROJECT®



Blue Zones Project Case Study: Albert Lea

Albert Lea, aptly named “The Land Between the Lakes,” is a charming small town in Minnesota, just south of the Twin Cities. Its picturesque setting includes six lakes, offering many outdoor activities for both locals and visitors alike. Following the economic crash of 2008, Albert Lea’s population began decreasing with a diminishing manufacturing base and a growing vacancy rate in the downtown area. County health indicators were well below the State average and the cost of healthcare was rising. Ready to make a change, Albert Lea was chosen as the first city in the U.S. to pilot the Blue Zones Project, in 2009. After about a year and a half of implementing the project, there was a 3.2-year bump in life expectancy; residents lost a combined 7,280 pounds; and health care costs dropped by 40%.¹ From 2011-2018, the County jumped up 34 points in the Minnesota County Health Rankings (previously 68 out of 87 counties).² Albert Lea gained national attention for these positive changes, with \$120,000 worth of media impact created from being featured in local and nationwide media, publications, and websites. Over the next 13 years, City stakeholders met on a monthly basis to continue efforts that transformed the community to live better, longer.

Built Environment

In its first year as a Blue Zones Project, Albert Lea adopted a Complete Streets Policy that aligned with a Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan, identifying areas for improvement in the sprawling community. Albert Lea added nine miles of sidewalks and three miles of bike lanes, including a five-mile “Blue Zones Walkway” that connects neighborhoods, parks, businesses, and the local hospital. Through these changes, Albert Lea increased walking and biking rates by 40%.³ In 2013, the City initiated a major downtown revitalization project that slowed traffic, widened sidewalks, beautified streets with public art, and more. These changes created a domino effect over the next five years, increasing downtown foot traffic by 96%, which then attracted more businesses. This investment raised downtown area property values by 25%, adding \$1.2 million to the City’s tax base. More than \$2.5 million have been invested in downtown building permits since 2013, with additional lodging taxes collected by the City due to an increase in visitors.⁴



Food Systems

In their pursuit of a healthier food system, Albert Lea took various proactive measures. They expanded community garden space by 150%, introduced nutritious checkout aisles in grocery stores, initiated a healthy breakfast and snack cart program in public schools, and local restaurants committed to providing more plant-based entrées. The results were remarkable, with significant sales boosts seen in fresh and frozen fruits, vegetables, and water. The positive impact extended to the City Arena, where concession sales witnessed a remarkable 59% increase, from 2014 to 2018, due to the introduction of healthy options.⁵ Furthermore, schools implementing the Grab-n-Go breakfast program observed a 60% increase in breakfast participation from 2014 to 2015, while the Healthy Snack Cart program experienced a notable 17% increase in participation during this same time period.

Tobacco

In 2019, Albert Lea became one of the first cities in the State to raise the minimum purchase age of tobacco to 21.⁶ Tobacco use has been eliminated at 550 units of public housing, 14 of the top 20 worksites, city-owned parks, county fairs, and outdoor dining. According to Gallup, tobacco use decreased from 21.2% in 2014 to 7% in 2021, equal to a 68% reduction. Over time, there has been a \$8.6 million savings in annual health care costs for employers as a result of the decline in smoking.⁷

For more information, please contact: builtenvironment@bluezones.com

Footnotes

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2. County Health Rankings and Roadmaps. Explore Health Rankings: Minnesota. <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/explore-health-rankings/minnesota>
3. Beaubaire, L. (2018, May 8). The Secret all cities can learn from Albert Lea, Minnesota. *Twin Cities Agenda*. <https://tcagenda.com/2018/secret-cities-can-learn-albert-lea-minnesota/>
4. Thoman, B. (2018, December 5). Road Diet Case Study. Minnesota Department of Transportation. <https://www.dot.state.mn.us/trafficeng/safety/road-diet-albert-lea.html>
5. Blue Zones. Blue Zones Project Results: Albert Lea, MN. <https://www.bluezones.com/blue-zones-results-albert-lea-mn/#>
6. Code of Ordinances: Albert Lea, MN. (2019). Article XII. - Tobacco. https://library.municode.com/mn/albert_lea/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=PTIICOOR_CH12BUBURE_ARTXIIIO
7. Blue Zones Project. (2018, October). Albert Lea, MN A Blue Zones Project Case Study. https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/217817/BZP_AlbertLea_CaseStudy_102618.pdf