

Creating Safe, Healthy and Active Living Communities



Photo: James Rojas

A Public Health Professional's Guide to Key Land Use and Transportation Planning Policies and Processes

In every area of California, undeveloped land is being rapidly developed and existing urban centers are constantly undergoing change. Each of these situations presents an opportunity to influence the way in which a "community" is designed. Public health agencies and professionals have an important role to play in ensuring that this process leads to the creation of safer and healthier neighborhoods. This document is an introduction to the major policies and processes in land use and transportation planning and the ways in which public health professionals can shift them to address health and integrate health-promoting community design. It also provides examples of how public health departments and other organizations are starting to do this important work.

Developed by Safe & Healthy Communities Consulting for the Epidemiology and Prevention for Injury Control Branch, California Department of Health Services and the California Center for Physical Activity

Who is the lead agency for land use planning?

Your City or County Planning Department

Land Use Planning

The General Plan

What is it?

Each city and county is required by state law to develop a comprehensive, long-term general plan for its physical development. Serving as the blueprint for future development and redevelopment, the general plan's goals and policies form the basis for land use decisions made by planning commissions, city councils and boards of supervisors.

General plans outline what a city/county envisions in terms of its overall pattern of growth and the type of place it wants to become (e.g., sprawl vs. Smart Growth, densities, housing mix and type, mixed vs. separate uses, transportation infrastructure, and land conservation). They generally include seven "elements" or components including: land use, circulation, housing, conservation, open-space, noise, and safety. Community health is usually an implied goal rather than explicitly stated and specifically defined. General plans go through a major revision every 10-15 years; smaller amendments are allowed four times annually. The process requires public outreach and input.

Why is this relevant to health?

It provides an opportunity to shift the overarching land use policy and vision of a city or county towards Smart Growth and walkable/livable communities. It also lays the foundation for changing a number of other, smaller policies and practices to support healthy community design.

Ideas for Public Health Action and Intervention

- ✓ Find out when your county and local cities will be going through a general plan update. Seek an official role on the advisory committee for the local public health agency or a public health representative.
- ✓ Advocate a Smart Growth vision for the plan, including goals and objectives that support livable, walkable communities.

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- ✓ Call for goals and objectives that are explicitly about health and that address the multiple impacts of the built environment (e.g., obesity, physical activity, injuries, asthma, health disparities). Provide examples from other communities and offer to draft the health-related text.
- ✓ Hold forums and other educational activities to teach planners and decision-makers about the health impacts and policy and design strategies and to encourage their role in protecting the public's health.
- ✓ Use data, fact sheets and issue reports to increase awareness and raise the profile of this issue among community design professionals, elected officials and the media.
- ✓ Bring under-represented groups to the table and build their capacity to effectively participate in the process. Educate them on: the safety/health/built environment link; livable communities policies and design; and the general plan process.

Developing a Health-Oriented Plan

King County, Washington has developed one of the first comprehensive plans [1] that places public health as a priority, outlines several health-related goals and uses health as a rationale for creating livable communities. The plan came about in the context of almost daily national headlines and local media attention to the dual epidemics of obesity and physical inactivity and the potential role of the built environment in these public health crises. About the same time, the local Department of Health released an issue paper on the problem of obesity and physical inactivity in King County. The report made the link to built environment factors and provided recommendations on planning policies and strategies for creating healthier, active living environments. Also, the County's Executive Office was preparing to commission a study on improving integration between land use and transportation planning. Recognizing the significance and relevance of the public health issues both nationally and locally, the County Executive called for expanding the study to explore the health implications and potential strategies for integrating health, land use and transportation planning. Using initial findings from the study, county staff were able to advocate for public health goals and language in the comprehensive plan and for strategies to promote walkable, livable neighborhoods. While not the initial instigator of these efforts, the local public health agency played a key role in developing the study and the comprehensive plan. They continue to collaborate closely with county, regional and state planning and transportation partners.

View the plan at: <http://www.metrokc.gov/ddes/COMPPLAN/2004/index.htm>. See the chapters on "Urban Communities" and "Transportation". Obtain a summary of the "Land Use, Transportation, Air Quality and Health" (LUTAQH) study at <http://www.metrokc.gov/kcdot/tp/ortp/Index.htm>.

Area Specific Plans & Redevelopment Plans

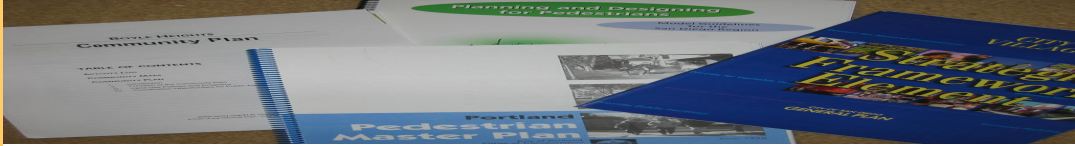
What are these?

Area specific plans are a special set of development standards that apply to a particular geographical area. They are not part of the general plan, but are instead, "mini" general plans for smaller, specific areas (e.g., an existing urban core or a new master planned community). Area specific plans give local governments and developers the flexibility to create zoning standards appropriate to the specific site and project.

A redevelopment plan is the land use plan for an area that has been designated as a redevelopment zone. Area sizes may range from an old shopping center to an entire neighborhood. Local citizens must be included in the redevelopment process and the governing body must approve of the plan.

City Redevelopment Agencies are the lead in redevelopment projects

[1] Washington and many other states refer to general plans as "comprehensive plans".



Why are these relevant to health?

In general, these plans are more site-specific and detailed and take less time to develop relative to a general plan. So, they can be good points for public health professionals to “jump in” to the land use planning process and have a more immediate impact.

Ideas for Public Health Action and Intervention

- ✓ Contact the local lead agencies to find out about upcoming specific plans and redevelopment projects.
- ✓ Find out if and how local citizens will be involved. Promote and facilitate their active engagement.
- ✓ Ask for an official role for public health on the plan’s advisory committee.
- ✓ Educate all those involved – citizen groups, business owners, community design professionals, developers & electeds – on the health and built environment issues and on the benefits of walkable communities design.

Zoning Codes (Ordinance)

What is this?

Each city and county has a zoning ordinance that serves as the tool for putting the general plan’s goals and objectives into action. While the general plan lays out a broad vision, the zoning ordinance is a regulatory tool that dictates land uses within the jurisdiction. It divides all land into zones and specifies densities, what can and cannot be built on the parcel (e.g., residential, industrial, commercial or mixed-use) and aspects of design (e.g., minimum lot size, building height and set-back).

Why it this relevant to health?

Most local zoning ordinances support auto- and sprawl-oriented development and disallow mixed-use and other features that promote walkability. In a recent survey, developers cited zoning ordinances as the major barrier to community efforts to build walkable, active living developments [\[2\]](#).

The zoning ordinance must be consistent with the general plan. Changing it requires a public hearing and approval from the local legislative body.

Public health concerns were part of the basis for the first zoning regulations in the US. Today, zoning is still intended to protect public health, safety, and welfare.

Ideas for Public Health Action and Intervention

- ✓ Provide a health rationale for zoning ordinances that support healthy community design. Reintroduce the notion of zoning as a tool for protecting the public’s health but broaden the definition of “public health” to include physical activity/obesity, injuries, respiratory diseases, health disparities, etc.
- ✓ Provide decision-makers with examples of “smart codes” and advocate for revisions that support Smart Growth, transit- and pedestrian-oriented development (particularly after a general plan update or amendment). See “Resources” for information on smart codes.



[\[2\]](#) Inam A, Levin J, Werbel R. Developer-planner interaction in transportation and land-use sustainability. Mineta Transportation Institute Report, San Jose State University, MTI 01-21, June 2002.

A Public Health Agency's Strategic Approach to Creating Healthy, Livable Communities

Riverside county faces a number of public health challenges: it is the #2 county in California for cardiovascular disease and has similarly high rates of obesity, traffic injuries and respiratory disease. The county is also one of the fastest growing - they plan to build 20 new cities to accommodate 1 million more people in the next 18 years - and has a long history of pursuing sprawl and auto-dependent development. Recognizing that diverse problems can often have a common solution, in 2003, the Riverside County Department of Public Health (DPH) embraced livable communities as a comprehensive strategy for improving the health of communities, even in the face of explosive growth and development. They've taken a multi-faceted approach that includes,



- *Getting their ducks in order:* they included a "livable communities" goal in their 3-year strategic plan. This allowed them to allocate general fund dollars to a new livable communities position. They also educated and got their own agency on board with the concept of public health's role in creating healthier communities.
- *Spreading the word:* they convened a series of cross-disciplinary workshops to introduce the health and community design link and begin a dialogue on public health's role in land use and transportation planning. The first forums targeted the decision-makers and were designed to build political and agency support. Later forums targeted planning and transportation agencies and were designed to train the professionals.

- *Participating in development projects:* they work with developers, city and county staff and communities to ensure that health and safety factors are considered in both new and infill developments. For example, the City of Coachella received a grant to conduct a community planning process for the redesign of its town center. Having been invited to participate in this process, DPH convened a community walkability workshop, brought in design experts, and introduced the community and decision-makers to a new vision for their city. As a result, the city decided to pursue a livable, walkable communities design and it spurred them to launch a general plan update to establish the goals and policies in support of walkability.

- *Walking the talk:* they changed the way the county goes about siting and designing new public health facilities. Previously, new buildings were sited and designed with minimal consideration of community needs or the impact on walkability. Now, the County Facilities Department seeks community input and sites and designs new structures so as to make them pedestrian-friendly and accessible to transit.

For more information, see the Livable Communities website at: www.rivco-buildhealth.org

Transportation Planning

The Regional Transportation Plan (RTP)

What is it?

A long-range plan (at least 20 years) that outlines the region's vision and plans for investing in the transportation system. Each year, regional planning agencies receive millions of dollars from state and federal transportation funds. The RTP designates the priorities and types of regional projects that will be funded with these monies (e.g., major highways; rail & transit; bike and pedestrian facilities; and Smart Growth projects). In most areas of the state, the RTP designates only a small portion of total funds to bike and pedestrian projects (less than 3%) or to Smart Growth projects.



Why is this relevant to health?

It provides an opportunity for a region to shift its transportation priorities and vision towards Smart Growth and livable/walkable communities. It is also an opportunity to increase funding for transit-oriented development (TODs) and bike and pedestrian improvement projects,

The RTP is also a major funding source for cities and counties to pay for local transportation improvement projects (e.g., sidewalks, traffic calming measures, bike lanes). Hence, the goals and priorities in the RTP significantly affect the types of projects that are funded at the local level.

RTPs are updated every 3-5 years and require public outreach and input into the process.

Ideas for Public Health Action and Intervention

- ✓ Participate in the public input process. Ideally, seek an official role for a public health representative on the RTP advisory committee.
- ✓ Build a stronger regional voice on transportation-related health issues. Convene a coalition of non-traditional stakeholders including, bike and pedestrian advocates, environmental groups, transportation reform advocates, community groups, social/environmental justice and racial/ethnic organizations, and other health groups. Speak to the health, safety, equity and quality of life impacts of auto-oriented development. Call for a livable communities & Smart Growth vision and strategies and for an increase in the amount of bike and pedestrian project funding. See “Resources” for information on model RTPs.
- ✓ As a long-term strategy, create a stronger grassroots movement in support of non-motorized transportation. Build capacity of local advocacy groups through small grants, training, collaboration and access to data and other resources.
- ✓ Promote a policy of “routine accommodation” of bikes and pedestrians in all major RTP-funded projects.
- ✓ Educate board members and staff of the regional planning agency on the health impacts of transportation planning and policy and design solutions.
- ✓ Ensure that the needs of under-represented neighborhoods are addressed and that they are engaged in the public input process.

Who is the lead agency for transportation planning?

In general, in California, the local Council/Association of Governments (e.g., the Sacramento Area Council of Governments - SACOG) or the Transportation Commission (e.g., Madera County Transportation Commission – MCTC) is responsible for regional transportation planning. However, according to Federal law, urban areas having a population of more than 50,000 must have a federally designated “Metropolitan Planning Organization” (MPO) with responsibility for regional transportation planning. Hence, in most metro areas, the COG or Transportation Commission is also the MPO^[3].

[3] For a map of transportation planning organizations in each area of the state, see <http://www.dot.ca.gov/hq/tpp/offices/orip/list/agencies&gov.htm>. For agency contacts, see: <http://www.calcoq.org/CALCOG%20members.htm>.

Street Design Standards

What is it?

Many cities and counties have standards or guidelines for the design and maintenance of local streets, sidewalks and roadways. These dictate lane width, number of lanes, sidewalk width, how and when traffic calming measures are applied, and several other factors that affect walkability.

Changes to local street design standards/guidelines are usually prompted by new policies within the city/county, practice changes in the traffic engineering field or by the community's advocacy efforts.

Why is this important to health?

Traffic engineers strictly follow local standards. If existing street design standards reflect outdated and auto-oriented design, they can be a significant barrier to attempts to make sidewalks and streets more walkable.

Who is the lead agency for traffic engineering?

Traffic engineering may be housed within the Department of Transportation or Public Works.

Ideas for Public Health Action and Intervention

- ✓ Work with your traffic engineering or public works department to revise local street design standards. Adopt standards that allow for skinny streets, wide sidewalks, traffic calming and other strategies that increase safety and access for pedestrians. Provide models from other communities (see "Resources").
- ✓ Call for "routine accommodation" of pedestrian and bicycle facilities whenever a road is repaved or a new one built.

Organizational Culture

What is it?

A variety of formal and informal systems-level policies and practices that affect an agency's capacity and "readiness" to address health as a planning and transportation issue and to adopt Smart Growth and walkable communities approaches.

Why is this important to health?

The underlying culture and mindset of planning and transportation agencies can sometimes be the barrier to understanding the relevance of health and to adopting community design approaches that promote health.

Ideas for Public Health Action and Intervention

- ✓ Advocate for each city and the county to hire a bike/pedestrian coordinator and to establish a bike/pedestrian advisory committee that includes citizens and public health stakeholders.
- ✓ Advocate for the regional transportation planning agency to establish a Smart Growth/walkable communities advisory committee to advise the agency's board on policies, funding priorities and programs. Include public health as an official member of the committee.
- ✓ Establish cross-disciplinary working groups among health, planning and transportation. Collaboratively develop policies and strategies for integrating health concerns into the community design process and for better coordinating land use and transportation planning.

Engaging Under-Represented Groups

Like many areas of the state, Monterey County is facing rapid growth and escalating housing costs. Also, like many counties, it is the low-income, communities of color that experience the most negative health, social and economic consequences of these trends. However, these are the voices and needs that are most unheard in land use and transportation planning decisions. LandWatch, a non-profit organization in Monterey County, facilitated bringing these voices to the table by training a group of local



residents so they could participate in the City of Salinas General Plan update (GPU). In January 2002, having attended LandWatch meetings on the general plan, twelve individuals approached the organization, requesting training, so they could participate effectively in the GPU process. For the next three months, this group of primarily monolingual Spanish-speaking agricultural workers met weekly for a three-hour class on land use policy. Participation grew from 12 to 30 to 300.

In March 2002, this group formalized their organization by selecting a name, "Líderes Comunitarios de Salinas", drafting a mission statement, electing officers, and planning a strategy to advocate for a specific set of policies for the GPU. The Líderes held that suburban sprawl threatened their community in two ways: (1) sprawling development on productive agricultural land threatens their jobs; and (2) the homes typically built are unaffordable to agricultural workers. They presented the city with a comprehensive set of policy recommendations called "The Community Plan". As a direct result of their advocacy, the GPU adopted by Salinas in September 2002: 1) requires higher minimum densities in all residential developments in new growth areas and 2) includes all ten recommended policies on traditional neighborhood design. In addition, the City commissioned a study and is exploring the feasibility and legality of adopting the Líderes recommendation that new housing be offered first to those living or working in Salinas.

Copies of the plan can be downloaded at:
www.landwatch.org/pages/issuesactions/salinas.html

Sources:

1. The Planning Commissioner's Book. Part Three: A Short Primer on State Planning Law. Accessed at http://ceres.ca.gov/planning/plan_comm/part3.html
2. Fulton, W. Guide to California Planning. Second Edition. Solano Press books. Point Arena, CA.
3. Hirschhorn JS. Zoning should promote public health. Am J Health Promot 2004;18(3):258-260.
4. Sclar E & Northridge ME. Property, politics and public health. AJPH 2001;91(7):1013-5.
5. Federal Highway Administration. The Metropolitan Transportation Planning Process: Key Issues. Available at: www.planning.dot.gov
6. Schilling J & Linton L. The public health roots of zoning. Am J Prev Med 2005;28(2S2):96-104.

Resources:

1. Smart Growth websites: Smart Growth Network, <http://www.smartgrowth.org> and Smart Growth America, <http://www.smartgrowthamerica.com>
2. Smart Codes: Smart Growth Network provides a list of land development regulations and tools, including examples of "Smart Codes". Access at: <http://www.smartgrowth.org/library/byldrtype.asp?typ=11>
3. Model RTPs: see the Sacramento Area Council of Governments Metropolitan Transportation Plan at: <http://sacog.org/mtp/index.cfm> and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission's plan at http://www.mtc.ca.gov/planning/2030_plan/index.htm.
4. Street Design Standards: the City of San Diego recently updated it's street design manual to improve safety and access by all road users. Available at: <http://www.sandiego.gov/planning/pdf/intro.pdf>

Glossary:

Smart Growth is defined by the American Planning Association as follows: "Smart growth means using comprehensive planning to guide, design, develop, revitalize and build communities for all that: have a unique sense of community and place; preserve and enhance valuable natural and cultural resources; equitably distribute the costs and benefits of development; expand the range of transportation, employment and housing choices in a fiscally responsible manner; value long-range, regional considerations of sustainability over short term incremental geographically isolated actions; and promote public health and healthy communities. Compact, transit accessible, pedestrian-oriented, mixed use development patterns and land reuse epitomize the application of the principles of smart growth." Accessed at: <http://www.planning.org/policyguides/smartgrowth.htm>

Transit Oriented Developments (TOD's): A mixed-use community within walking distance of a transit stop that mixes residential, retail, office, open space, and public uses in a way that makes it convenient to travel on foot or by public transportation instead of by car.

Routine Accommodation: The practice of accommodating bicycling and walking as a routine part of all transportation planning, design, construction, operations and maintenance activities (i.e., sidewalks, bike lanes or other facilities will be added whenever a road is built or improved).

Smart Codes: Smart codes are designed to guide the renovation and rehabilitation of existing properties rather than promote new development. Because today's building codes are designed for new construction, they can pose inflexible barriers to redevelopment. As a result, many states and municipalities are considering the adoption of smart codes.

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