



Healthy Neighborhoods: Local Governments Keep Health in Mind When Planning for Sustainability

www.ca-ilg.org/HealthyNeighborhoods/PlanningforSustainability

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Cities and counties throughout California are demonstrating leadership in creating active, lively communities that support the health and vitality of their residents while also making their communities more sustainable. This paper offers a snapshot of some of the ways that local leaders are keeping health in mind when adopting policies and best practices that support sustainable communities — places that foster and maintain a high quality of life for their residents on an ongoing basis.

The examples cover six topic areas of local agency policy and practice that contribute to more healthy and sustainable neighborhoods:

- Planning and community design
- Transportation and mobility
- Community services
- Public safety
- Economic development
- Healthy workplaces

To access any of these case stories as well as other information and resources on creating healthy neighborhoods, visit the Institute for Local Government's website at www.ca-ilg.org/healthy-neighborhoods. Each snapshot also includes an embedded hyperlink to a more extensive case story on the Healthy Neighborhoods section of the ILG website.

Health, Planning and Community Design

Decisions surrounding planning and community design can have significant impacts on the physical, social and mental health of community members.

Research has found that safe, affordable housing near jobs, schools and services supports better health outcomes for residents. Infill housing and providing a mix of commercial and residential uses in existing neighborhoods are important strategies that promote both sustainability and health. [Simi Valley](#) maintains a citywide database of vacant and underutilized infill sites to

monitor the city's growth and change, including annual reporting on the number of infill sites that were developed during the previous year. [Sacramento County](#) encourages greater infill development with a three-pronged approach that includes 14 corridor plans with updated designs and densities for older, under-utilized commercial corridors; a general plan update focused on infill; and staff assigned to facilitate infill in the county unincorporated area. [Palo Alto](#) allows mixed use on commercially zoned parcels and small retail services in residential projects, thus making walking and biking to and from retail services more feasible for residents.

In response to staggering public health statistics, [Rancho Cucamonga](#) established a city-wide initiative dedicated to encouraging healthy and sustainable lifestyles. As part of this initiative, the city passed a zoning ordinance to allow farmers markets into one of the neediest neighborhoods and created a program that is helping residents make healthier choices. In addition to passing the Farmers Market Ordinance, the city started a Safe Routes to School Program in three schools and developed a youth leadership program. The city holds a leadership role in California Healthy Eating, Active Living (HEAL) campaign and has even received national recognition for its ongoing commitment to health and resident engagement from Michelle Obama's Let's Move! Campaign.

The [City of Richmond](#) successfully engaged hundreds of its diverse residents to create an updated general plan that includes an innovative Health and Wellness element aimed at boosting community health by improving the built environment. This multifaceted approach included community meetings, resident advisory groups, walking audits, mapping exercises, web and email outreach, mailings, presentations to stakeholders, tabling at events, and a bilingual wrapped "Plan Van" to inform and involve residents in updating the city's General Plan and addressing local health concerns. The majority of these events included bilingual translation.

With areas of significant poverty and a pattern of sprawl, the City of [Fresno](#) saw a critical need to develop a new strategy to guide future development. Working with community partners to help attract the very diverse resident population, the city's public participation efforts successfully engaged more residents and a wider cross-section of the community than ever before. The result is a new general plan that incorporates a broadly shared vision for a more healthy and sustainable future for the city.

A comprehensive update of the [Livermore](#) zoning code will better incorporate "smart code" practices, such as enhanced pedestrian and bicycle mobility, transit-oriented development, mixed-use and infill. The city's greenhouse gas inventory determined that 63 percent of Livermore's carbon emissions come from automobiles. Hence, in addition to the planning and zoning code revisions, the city is in the process of updating its bicycle master plan. Livermore plans to double its network of bike paths from 46 miles to nearly 90 miles and walking trails from 22 miles to 108 miles, providing safe and convenient opportunities for residents to lead active, healthy lifestyles.

Like many small cities across the country, the city of [Santa Cruz](#) is struggling to maintain its small-town character and economic vitality despite enormous growth pressures. With few new development sites left, the city has turned to its primary asset for help – its single-family neighborhoods, where it is allowing property owners to develop accessory dwelling units,

commonly known as a “granny flat”. Santa Cruz has one of the least affordable housing markets in the country for both home buyers and renters. And because 95 percent of Santa Cruz’s homes are within a half-mile of public transportation, this program also supports smart growth. Affordable rental housing is built at no cost to the city, renters have more diverse housing options and homeowners can earn extra income to help with their mortgage: a win-win-win situation.

Health, Transportation and Mobility

Healthy neighborhoods offer bike-able, walkable or transit-oriented transportation systems that are safe, provide appropriate travel options, are easily accessed, and are feasible for all populations and all trips.

[Pleasanton](#) teamed up with the Livermore-Amador Valley Transportation Authority to launch a new electric-hybrid bus service that connects riders to busy employment and shopping centers and mass transit stations. The limited-stop service uses innovative technology, such as bus signal priority, that reduces the number of stops at signals. The electric-hybrid buses eliminate particulate pollution that contributes to asthma and other health problems, while the limited-stop service reduces idling and makes the trips faster, benefiting riders.

[Apple Valley](#) adopted a multi-use trail plan and a bicycle system that include more than 31 miles of trails. New developments incorporate adjacent bike paths that pedestrians can also use, helping knit the community together in a way that promotes active transportation.

The [City of Baldwin Park](#), once known for having the highest incidence of obesity in the central San Gabriel Valley region, now has one of strongest complete streets policies in the nation. The policy is aimed at creating a safe and efficient transportation system that promotes health and mobility for all of Baldwin Park’s residents and visitors. Baldwin Park’s Complete Streets policy creates standards and design criteria that are part of a larger initiative to create a healthier, more active community.

The [City of El Cerrito](#) initiated the San Pablo Avenue Streetscape Improvement Project in collaboration with the Contra Costa County Transportation Authority and Caltrans. The project’s goals were “to create a distinctive sense of place, improve the walking environment, enhance transit stops, provide better landscaping and increase pedestrian safety and accessibility.” The process began in 2007 and concluded in 2011, marking El Cerrito as a leader in active transportation and complete streets policies and design.

The underpinning of the City of Riverside’s General Plan is a commitment that [Riverside](#) residents will have “easy access to an efficient, multi-option transportation system that enables them to meet their needs within the community.” The Riverside Bicycle Master Plan is consistent with other key elements of the city’s updated general plan, including the land use and urban design, parks and recreation, and the circulation and community mobility elements. The city also has adopted the Green Riverside Action Plan which emphasizes planning for walk-able and bike-able neighborhoods, including the goal of making bicycles a key mode of transportation for everyday travel and not just for recreation.

Health and Community Services

Community services and programs operated by public agencies and community groups provide health benefits by facilitating social interaction and support, promoting healthy living and providing equitable access to community resources.

Using community open space for gardens can provide health benefits. [Palm Springs](#) and [Palo Alto](#) promote healthy eating by allowing residents to grow and harvest their own vegetables and herbs in city-provided community gardens. [Glendale](#) offers its residents four community gardens and three farmers markets, which help provide fresh and nutritious locally grown food.

The [Greenfield Walking Group](#) started as a small group of Latino mothers hoping to get a little exercise, but now serves as a powerful advisory group that is helping to increase access to healthy foods and safe places to play in their community. An engaged and respectful relationship between local officials and the walking group is credited for the ongoing success in addressing community concerns and creating healthier community design policies in the city of Bakersfield and throughout Kern County. Conducting a walkability assessment in partnership with Bakersfield city staff provided the opportunity to communicate what steps had already been taken to improve the walking environment and how each group could do more.

Since the collaboration began, a number of other changes have occurred in Stiern Park including: replacement and fixing of lights, removal of graffiti, new paint on buildings and structures, new shrubs and plants, removal of dangerous materials from playground sand and the installation of new playground equipment and basketball court. In addition, the city installed speed limit signs, crosswalks and sidewalks on adjacent streets to support walkability. The children of the Greenfield Walking Group members recently participated in helping implement a healthy store conversion in neighboring Kings County and continue to help clean up graffiti where it all began- in Stiern Park.

In the wake of a housing boom that left residents with little park space to play, joint use partnerships in [Merced](#) have increased residents' opportunities to be active by sharing athletic courts and fields, pools, gymnasiums and other spaces that facilitate activity. Joint use agreements allowed the City of Merced and the Merced High School District and Merced City School District to develop a partnership that continues to provide residents, students, and community groups with places to gather and be active. The partnership has grown beyond standard joint use facility agreements. The city and the school district collaborate on grant opportunities, work to revitalize blighted facilities, and develop new recreational spaces for the enjoyment and benefit of all.

Health and Public Safety

Unsafe environments pose a direct health risk to residents, but the perception of safety also impacts their health and well-being by influencing their level of engagement in physical and social activities. Residents who don't feel safe in their communities are less likely to be involved, increasing their risk of isolation, obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure.

Nearly 600 traffic collisions occurred in [Dixon](#) from 2002 to 2011, and 13 percent of these involved pedestrians or bicyclists. When the Solano Transportation Authority approached the community about improving transportation options with a focus on school routes, the city and the schools partnered with the authority to study the problem and implement program and physical improvements. This partnership extended to all seven cities within the county to prioritize potential Safe Routes to School projects.

Neighborhood blight and neglect can lead to poor health and costly clean up, so when officials in the [City of Madera](#) noticed a dramatic increase in graffiti, they turned to the community for a quick resolution. With a strong commitment from the city council, the Neighborhood Revitalization Department launched an “information and removal” campaign which mobilized more than 1,500 volunteers. The program is credited not only for a decrease in graffiti, but for helping form vibrant neighborhood social and self-help networks throughout the community and led to the creation of a Citizen’s Academy to actively educate and engage community volunteers on an ongoing basis.

The fast growing [City of Delano](#) is collaborating with community partners to successfully engage a cross section of residents in the General Plan Update process, with a particular emphasis on public health and safety. Recognizing the impacts of the built environment on public health, the city council voted in 2010 to add a Health and Wellness Element when updating Delano’s General Plan. City officials have found that focusing on how youth are affected by planning decisions is one effective way to engage a large cross section of the community in considering how future development could combat obesity and give residents more opportunity to walk, bike, and eat fresh healthy foods.

Health and Economic Development

Health and prosperity go hand-in-hand. Research shows that neighborhoods that offer a range of jobs and attract and retain local businesses and industries have healthier residents.

Vacant and abandoned lots in a community can attract crime, create health hazards or lead to depressed property values. City-owned lots are one area where local government can directly reduce neighborhood blight at a minimal cost. The [City of Long Beach](#) has a fairly simple, creative and easily replicated use for vacant city lots that also offers added benefits for sustainability, job training, community collaboration and access to healthy foods. Vacant lots that have been mulched through the city’s program have attracted the attention of organizations interested in community gardens and urban farming, because mulch greatly improves soil quality. The city decided to allow community gardens and urban farms to use properties not slated for development in the near future. The Spring Street Farm Project now includes a stand that sells fresh local produce to the community.

[Sonoma County](#) implemented a pilot composting program in its detention facilities, diverting approximately 1,200 pounds of food waste per month. The program is the first vermiculture composting (worm farm) program in a detention facility in the state. Inmates learn about green industry and acquire job skills, thus potentially reducing recidivism.

The [City of Hughson](#) is taking dramatic steps to secure a future of sustainable economic prosperity by building upon the key component of its local economy – agriculture. In January of 2013, the city adopted a farmland preservation program that requires the permanent preservation of two acres of farmland for every one acre of land that is converted for residential use. The 2:1 ratio seeks to promote the city’s culture, farming heritage, environmental stewardship and sustainable economic development. The demand for local and sustainable food has grown in recent years. Preserving farmland guarantees the ability to produce sufficient amounts of local healthy food thereby driving down the cost and dependency on such food from outside the region.

Over the past decade, [Riverside](#) planted more than 110,000 trees through its Tree Power Program, increasing its urban forest and community shade cover. These additional trees resulted in saving more than 16.2 million kilowatt hours of electricity, reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 24.6 million pounds, or 12.3 tons, and directing \$500,000 in economic investment to local nurseries.

A recent research brief by the [Center for Civic Partnerships](#) tells the story of [Sonoma County’s corner store movement](#), highlighting the Healthy Food Outlet Project which focused on creating healthy food options for low-income residents and spurring local business growth. The story shares Sonoma County Department of Public Health’s active role in the program and a resulting partnership between the county and the City of Santa Rosa. Santa Rosa’s Community Development Department was pursuing an economic development strategy to fill vacant lots with new businesses. By reaching out to the county, the strategy also increased access to healthy food.

Healthy Workplaces

Efforts to improve employee wellness are beneficial to both employee and employer. Programs and policies that prevent obesity, support healthy nutrition, provide tobacco cessation resources, encourage physical activity can reduce health care costs.

In the face of an economic downturn and rising health insurance costs, the City of [Riverside](#) implemented a wellness program for its 2,400 employees. The program provides educational resources, fitness events, health fairs, and wellness incentives. It has had wide employee participation and is adding elements yearly. The program has decreased employee sick time, improved the health of employees, built positive relationships within the community, promoted positive employee/employer relationships, and reduced the rate of the city life insurance plan. Specific features of the Riverside program include:

- Comprehensive wellness [website](#) with educational resources and a statement of the City of Riverside’s Wellness Philosophy
- Annual Get Fit Challenge: A weight loss competition and annual January event that announces competition winners

- Annual Wellness Fair: Provides products and services from local businesses, provides health demos and screening, promotes novel exercise activities like Zumba dance and Sumo wrestling
- Weekly wellness workshops at various employee worksites: since 2009 there have been 57 health workshops
- On-site health assessments, scans or screenings
- Coordinated events with charities to raise funds while promoting wellness

Seeking ways to help curb rising medical claims and costs, the County of Ventura's Board of Supervisors established a wellness program for employees. Starting in 1985, the [Ventura Wellness Program](#) has evolved and expanded to provide a wide variety of programs and services that are effective in improving the health and wellness of employees and their families. With the goal of controlling increases in medical costs, the program provides education and resources to employees and follow-up and assistance to high-risk employees in order to assist them with their health needs, encouraging more effective, efficient use of health care services. Conservative estimates of the average preventable cost per participant are calculated at \$2,049 per year, which translates to a return of over \$3 on every dollar invested in the Wellness Program.

Conclusion

As these examples demonstrate, local officials can provide leadership in many ways to create healthier and more sustainable neighborhoods. The Online Guide to Planning Healthy Neighborhoods (www.ca-ilg.org/online-guide-planning-healthy-neighborhoods) is another useful resource that:

- Identifies the reasons to be concerned about the relationship between health and the built environment;
- Offers options for transforming that concern into a vision for a healthier community; and
- Provides strategies and examples of how to translate that vision into action.

About the Institute for Local Government

This resource is a service of the Institute for Local Government (ILG) whose mission is to promote good government at the local level with practical, impartial, and easy-to-use resources for California communities. ILG is the nonprofit 501(c)(3) research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties. For more information and to access the Institute's resources on sustainable communities, visit www.ca-ilg.org/Sustainability. If you would like to access this resource directly, go to www.ca-ilg.org/HealthyNeighborhoods/PlanningforSustainability.

The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

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