

# Be a City with Healthy Land Use Policies

Many people believe that dealing with overweight and obesity is a personal responsibility. To some degree they are right, but it is also a community responsibility. When there are no safe, accessible places for children to play or adults to walk, jog, or ride a bike, that is a community responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

—U.S. Surgeon General

Think of a city where you love walking. Are there safe sidewalks, grocery stores or restaurants, and other people out walking? Are children and families relaxed and playing in well-maintained parks? It's not an accident that some neighborhoods attract pedestrians and that some communities have parks while others do not. What gets built in a city reflects that city's policies and goals for improving the health and activity of their residents and workers.



Cities can help improve residents' health with general plan and zoning policies. Photo by Visions LLC/Photolibrary.

In much of California, housing, schools, retail, worksites and parks are separated from each other by roads that discourage walking and biking and make people dependent on cars. In an effort to improve the health of their residents, some cities are promoting physical activity, particularly walking and biking, through their general plans and zoning codes. These strategies address both the obesity epidemic—rates of obesity increase in proportion to vehicular miles traveled<sup>2</sup>—and state mandates to reduce greenhouse gasses.<sup>3</sup>

Access to healthy food can likewise be enhanced through land use strategies. Adding measurable goals regarding access to grocery stores, farmers' markets and community gardens to a city's general plan can establish the foundation for zoning ordinances, permitting processes and business incentives to bring produce and other healthy items into underserved neighborhoods.

The co-benefits of using your city's general plan, zoning code and infrastructure investments to promote safe, active transportation, increase open space and support nutritious food are a healthy population and a healthy environment.



**The Healthy Eating Active Living Cities Campaign** provides training and technical assistance to help city officials adopt policies that improve their communities' physical activity and retail food environments. Supporting healthy choices is essential to address the obesity epidemic among California's children and adults, currently costing the state more than \$41 billion annually in healthcare and lost productivity.

The Campaign, funded by Kaiser Permanente and the Vitamin Cases Consumer Settlement Fund, is a partnership of the League of California Cities, the California Center for Public Health Advocacy, and the Cities Counties and Schools Partnership.

*This fact sheet is one in a series providing background and policy ideas for healthy cities.*

[www.HealCitiesCampaign.org](http://www.HealCitiesCampaign.org)

## Healthy Eating Active Living City Policies

This fact sheet explores policies that cities can adopt to create a healthy built environment through three land use mechanisms:

1. The city's planning process
2. Zoning regulations
3. Infrastructure investments

Cities can use these land use mechanisms to become more healthy and sustainable.

See the HEAL Cities Campaign website ([www.HealCitiesCampaign.org](http://www.HealCitiesCampaign.org)) for more resources.

## 1 Healthy Planning

Cities throughout California are using their planning processes to address the obesity epidemic. Approximately 30 cities are using the general plan update to articulate measurable goals and policies that will enhance residents' physical activity and access to healthy food. Some cities are including a separate health element in their general plan; others are adding health goals and policies in various general plan elements.

For example, the City of Richmond drafted the Community Health and Wellness Element in its general plan update to formulate 10 goals that set the stage for policies to improve residents' proximity to open space, parks and produce markets; increase access to federal food programs such as WIC and the USDA lunch program; and implement joint use agreements with the school district.

Many are including a focus on smart growth principles. The term "smart growth" refers to developing healthy, vibrant communities where homes, jobs, schools and places for play are nearby each other and linked by walking, biking, and transit. The smart growth approach is gaining ground as climate change mandates shape transportation and housing planning. Smart growth principles can be included in the general plan and implemented through the zoning code.



Many cities are promoting bicycling for fun, fitness and transportation. Photo by Monique Rodriguez.



The City of Anderson's River Park provides multiple recreation areas for residents of all ages. Picture by Jeri Butler, Shasta County Public Health.

The City of Chula Vista's general plan update incorporates health-related goals and policies throughout the elements, including a focus on smart growth principles and walking and biking systems. The City of South Gate's general plan update encompasses safe routes to school, community gardens and attention to the concentration of unhealthy foods, particularly around schools.

### ■ Increase Park and Open Space Acreage Through the General Plan

Cities can set goals to increase parklands in their general plan and aim to increase the acreage of total recreational areas by looking at public easements, old railroad rights-of-way and vacant city-owned land. The City of Santa Rosa prioritizes funding for park development and maintenance in "park-poor" and low-income neighborhoods in its general plan.

Cities' master plans and specific plans offer additional avenues for incorporating access to physical activity and healthy food into the planning process. Many cities are using their bike and pedestrian master plans to shape zoning regulations and infrastructure investment to build sidewalks, crosswalks, bike lanes and other elements to increase active transportation.

## 2 Healthy Zoning Regulations

Zoning regulations are another powerful land use tool for promoting healthy eating and active living. The Healthy Eating Active Living Cities Campaign recommends the following zoning strategies to improve your residents' health.

### ■ Promote Compact, Mixed-Use and Transit-Oriented Development

Cities can support increased daily physical activity among residents by adopting high-density mixed-use zoning. A mix of residential, commercial and office uses in a particular zone can create a neighborhood where people can walk and bike to meet their daily needs. Establishing a minimum—rather than a maximum—density in these zones assures there are enough people and development to support a lively, interactive destination.



*Pedestrian bridges can link residents to nearby commerce. Photo by Jeri Butler, Shasta County Public Health.*

The City of Walnut Creek has been a smart growth city since the early 1980s. The highest residential densities are downtown and near the BART station, allowing more compact development close to activity and providing good access to regional transit. The city promotes this increased density in conjunction with other important goals of the general plan, including provision of additional housing, preservation of neighborhood scale, an emphasis on retail development, and expansion of the park and open space system.<sup>4</sup>

#### ■ Increase Walking and Biking Through Street Design

Cities can establish design guidelines and standards for pedestrian corridors and roadways that support walking and biking. Guidelines can include the following:

- Using universal design and “complete streets” principles to accommodate pedestrians, bicyclists, skaters and wheelchairs along with motor vehicles in transportation corridors
- Enhancing the connectivity between streets, trails and other pedestrian thoroughfares
- Calming traffic to slow down vehicles
- Installing streetscaping such as vegetation, trees and art installations to enhance the aesthetics of walking and biking throughways

The “complete streets” movement embodies these guidelines for enhancing walking and biking. The complete streets approach can be included in the zoning code as well as the general plan, the bike and pedestrian master and specific plans, and redevelopment plans and financing. The City of Sacramento’s Pedestrian-Friendly Street Standards exemplify this approach.

## Bikable Cities

The City of Davis is known as one of the most bikable cities in California, with about 25% of all trips made by bicycle. Davis provides more than 100 miles of bike lanes, trails and other bicycle routes within its 10.5 square miles. The city has prioritized pedestrian and bicycle safety with highway underpasses and overpasses and traffic-light sensors for bike crossing. The current general plan states, “The keys to Davis’ successful bike system are its linkage of key origins and destinations and its connections across physical barriers such as freeways, creeks, and major streets.” The city has a bicycle advisory committee and a full-time pedestrian and bike coordinator.

#### ■ Support Existing and Create New Farmers’ Markets

Farmers’ markets provide access to fresh fruits and vegetables and serve as an economic and social hub in a community. They are often an important source of produce in underserved neighborhoods. Defining farmers’ markets as an allowable use within the municipal code and designating appropriate locations is an important step cities can take to protect existing markets and create new ones. Encouraging farmers’ markets to accept federal food subsidies makes their produce accessible to low-income residents.

Community members, the planning department and elected officials of the City of Fresno worked together to amend its zoning code to define farmers’ markets as an allowed use.<sup>5</sup> The Cities of Fresno and Ceres, and the San Diego neighborhood of La Jolla are partnering with schools to host farmers’ markets on school grounds. The City of San Francisco requires its farmers’ markets to accept Electronic Benefits cards (EBT) and WIC and Senior Farmers’ Market Program vouchers.<sup>6</sup>



*Cities can increase places for youth to be physically active. Photo by Tim Wagner for HEAC.*

▪ **Support Existing and Create New Community Gardens**

Community gardens are a potential source of produce, whether they are located on school grounds, on easements and rights of way, in new housing developments or on vacant city land. Cities can include language in their general plans to protect existing and create new community gardens. The zoning code can be amended to define community gardens as a sub-use within designated open spaces and as an approved use within designated districts, such as residential, multi-family, industrial or other zones. The City of Escondido adopted a zoning amendment to make vacant land available for community gardens.<sup>7</sup> The City of Sacramento adopted the Front Yard Landscape Ordinance to allow diversified urban landscapes, including fruit and vegetable gardens, in front yards.<sup>8</sup>

▪ **Limit Unhealthy Food Retail**

A number of cities have modified their municipal codes to restrict the number of fast-food restaurants.

The Institute for Local Self Reliance offers many national examples, among them these California cities:

- Carmel-by-the-Sea prohibits fast food, drive-in and chain restaurants.
- The City of Arcata's Formula Business Restrictions ordinance limits the number of chain restaurants in the city to no more than nine at any one time.
- The Calistoga city council passed a city ordinance prohibiting fast-food restaurants as necessary to preserve the unique character of Calistoga's downtown commercial district.
- The City of Los Angeles passed a moratorium on fast-food in South LA, along with a package of incentives to support healthy food retail.



*Community gardens encourage exercise and neighbor interactions and provide affordable food. Photo by the City of Chino.*



*Farmers' markets increase the availability of fruits and vegetables. Photo by Rhonda Winter.*

### 3 Healthy Infrastructure Investment

Cities can focus infrastructure investments on walking, biking and access to recreation.

▪ **Target infrastructure investments on walking and biking**

One vehicle for increasing walking and biking is the city's Capital Improvements Program (CIP), which can prioritize projects to build sidewalks, crosswalks and bike lanes. An annual review can judge how well CIP infrastructure projects match general plan policies.

The City of La Mesa created a prioritized list for adding sidewalks along routes to schools and recreational facilities as part of a Walkability Plan in 2005. A youth-led survey subsequently identified walkability as a priority for high school students. With the students' input, the city obtained grants to improve sidewalks at a high school and at all of the elementary and middle schools in the City.

▪ **Utilize joint use agreements to increase recreational opportunities**

Cities can partner with school districts to share the costs and responsibilities of building and maintaining park and recreation facilities and making school grounds available to city residents during non-school hours. Built-out cities can utilize joint use agreements to increase resident access to open space and recreational facilities. The Cities of Richmond and Berkeley include joint use goals and policies in their general plans. The Cities of Fresno, Pixley, Chula Vista and Baldwin Park, among others, have strong joint use agreements in place.



Cities can consider vacant city-owned land, public easements, and old railroad rights-of-way to increase parklands.  
Photo by richreidphotography.com.

### Resources—Organizations and Toolkits

**Institute for Local Government (ILG)**, [www.ca-ilg.org](http://www.ca-ilg.org), is the nonprofit research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties. ILG provides tools and resources for city and county officials and community leaders on a range of topics, including intergovernmental collaboration, climate change and land use planning. ILG's Healthy Neighborhoods Project focuses on the intersection between land use and health. Their *Guide to Creating Healthy Neighborhoods* will be part of a new series on *Understanding the Basics of Land Use*.

**Planning for Healthy Places**, [www.healthyplanning.org](http://www.healthyplanning.org), a program of Public Health Law and Policy, offers multiple resources on land use, including the following:

- *How to Create and Implement Healthy General Plans*—A primer on how the general plan can advance health; includes sample language and case studies.
- *Economic Development and Redevelopment: A Toolkit on Land Use and Health*—An introduction to available economic development and redevelopment tools and resources that can improve access to healthy food in low-income neighborhoods.
- *Establishing Land Use Protection for Community Gardens*—A brief that includes general plan and model zoning language to protect and expand community gardens.
- *Establishing Land Use Protection for Farmers' Markets*—A brief that includes model general plan language to protect and expand farmers' markets.

**Policy Link**, [www.policylink.org](http://www.policylink.org), has a report, *The Impact of the Built Environment on Health*, that provides case studies of California cities that are incorporating health into planning and development (see especially pages 23–29).

**Local Government Commission (LGC)**, [www.lgc.org](http://www.lgc.org), is a nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization that provides technical assistance and networking to local elected officials and community leaders. LGC fact sheets in English and Spanish provide excellent information on smart growth, walkability and bikability, community gardens and a host of other topics related to planning and health.

Among their many useful tools:

- *Smart Growth Zoning Codes: A Resource Guide*
- *Street Design Guidelines for Healthy Neighborhoods*

**The City Project**, [www.cityprojectca.org](http://www.cityprojectca.org), uses GIS mapping to analyze the ratio of residents to open space and parks in the Los Angeles and San Diego regions. Its report, *Healthy Parks, Schools and Communities for All: Park Development and Community Revitalization*, outlines guidelines for allocating park resources.

**The League of American Bicyclists**, [www.bikeleague.org](http://www.bikeleague.org), promotes bicycling for fun, fitness and transportation and advocates for a bicycle-friendly America. Their website includes local resources.

California's **Joint Use Statewide Task Force (JUST)**, [www.jointuse.org](http://www.jointuse.org), offers resources for cities interested in pursuing effective joint use policies and agreements.

*Resources continue on next page.*

## Resources—City Policies

**City of Chula Vista**, [www.chulavistaca.gov](http://www.chulavistaca.gov)

Chula Vista's general plan update includes health goals, smart growth principles, and bikeways, sidewalks, paths and trails.

**City of Davis**, [www.cityofdavis.org/bicycles](http://www.cityofdavis.org/bicycles)

The City of Davis website provides information about its bicycle advisory committee, maps, bike safety, bike history and forthcoming national bike museum.

**City of South Gate**

[www.raimiassociates.com/db\\_files/calapa2008healthysgraimicompatibilitymode.pdf](http://www.raimiassociates.com/db_files/calapa2008healthysgraimicompatibilitymode.pdf).

This document presents the rationale for the new health element of the City of South Gate's general plan, provides health data and delineates health-related goals and objectives.

**City of Richmond**, [www.cityofrichmondgeneralplan.org](http://www.cityofrichmondgeneralplan.org)

This draft health element has 10 goals that include proximity to open space, parks and produce markets; increased access to federal food programs, such as food stamps and the subsidized lunch program; and joint use with the school district.

**City of La Mesa**, [www.cityoflamesa.com](http://www.cityoflamesa.com)

The city's Wellness Program has produced guidelines for increasing walking and biking.

**City of Fresno**

<http://www.fresno.gov/NR/exeres/02461475-5097-41A4-948E-271C55377056.htm>

This article under "green enterprise" outlines the background and gives the details of the city's new zoning language amending its municipal code to define farmers' markets as an allowable use.

**City of Berkeley**, [www.ci.berkeley.ca.us](http://www.ci.berkeley.ca.us)

The expanded open space and recreation element of the city's general plan includes policies for community gardens, highlighting locations and potential partners.



*With a mix of residential, commercial and office uses people can walk or bike to most activities. Photo Rhonda Winter.*

## Join the Healthy Eating Active Living Cities Campaign

Go to [www.HealCitiesCampaign.org](http://www.HealCitiesCampaign.org) and let us know what you are doing, or contact the campaign:

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