

QUICKNOTES

Integrating Health into the Comprehensive Plan

Land-use policies and development directly affect many aspects of public health. The quality of the air we breathe and the water we drink, the safety of the streets we use to get around, and even our daily levels of physical activity and dietary choices all depend, to some extent, on land-use and transportation decisions made by local governments. Yet, until recently, relatively few comprehensive plans explicitly addressed the potential effects of land use on health.

The comprehensive plan is the official statement of a city council or county board about where and how to accommodate future growth or change in the built environment. Because it addresses a broad range of interrelated topics using a long time horizon (at least 20 years), a comprehensive plan that includes strong public health goals and policies can be the single most important document for putting a community on the path toward a healthier future.

The Relationship of Planning to Health

Community planning processes set the stage for policies, programs, and regulations that guide decisions about land-use development and transportation investments, and a growing body of research points to numerous connections between community design and public health.

One major connection is the effect urban form can have on both obesity and air quality. When development is compact (i.e., higher density and intensity), people are more likely to walk, bike, or take transit. Furthermore, if there is a mix of uses (e.g., commercial and residential) in an area with a compact development pattern, people are even more likely to get out of their cars. Therefore, bringing destinations into closer proximity can act as both an obesity prevention strategy and an effective way to reduce smog.

Similarly, the amount and location of parks and other green spaces can affect obesity, mental health, and water quality. When people have convenient, safe access to parks and recreation facilities, they exercise more. There is also evidence suggesting that the mere presence of greenery can lower stress, promote healing, and help children concentrate in school. Green spaces also capture and filter stormwater runoff, which recharges drinking water sources and reduces surface water contamination associated with waterborne illnesses.

Community design can affect public health in other important ways too. For example, when streets are not well connected or not designed to accommodate users of all ages and abilities, people drive more. When people don't have convenient access to stores that sell fresh, healthy food, they are less likely to eat recommended amounts of fruits and vegetables. And when people live near hazardous waste storage or transportation facilities, they face increased exposure risks.

Each community has opportunities to address all of these connections through goals and policies in its comprehensive plan. Depending on community context and preference, cities and counties may decide to either integrate these goals and policies throughout existing plan elements such as land use, transportation, housing, and community facilities, or they may choose to create stand-alone health elements.

Integrating Health Throughout the Plan

Many comprehensive plans already address a wide range of issues important to public health. Traditionally, though, relatively few plans have taken the opportunity to make health an explicit overarching theme for the plan.

www.pedbikeimages.org/Laura Sanot



*People are more active when they
have access to safe, convenient parks,
sidewalks, and bike paths.*



American Planning Association

Making Great Communities Happen

Integrating health throughout existing plan elements often starts during the visioning process for a plan update. Visioning gives planners, public officials, public health professionals, and engaged citizens a chance to discuss relationships between planning, community design, and health. The information shared during these visioning discussions can be used to inform the introductory issues and opportunities element of the plan. This element should include a narrative description of the reasons for addressing health explicitly in the comprehensive plan as well as overarching goals related to health outcomes.

After setting the stage in the issues and opportunities section of the plan, participants can add more specific goals and policies that support health to each element of the plan. These goals and policies may be grouped together in each element or dispersed in accordance with the organizing principles of the plan as a whole (e.g., goals and policies may be grouped by community areas or by time horizon).

The land-use element is the place to include goals and policies that encourage increased density and intensity and an appropriate mix of uses. This element is also a good place to add goals and policies that promote pedestrian- and transit-friendly design and encourage the use of Health Impact Assessments in development proposal review.

The transportation element is the place to state the importance of a transportation network that considers the needs and abilities of all users. Health-related goals and policies may encourage well-connected streets with safe, attractive routes to promote bicycle and pedestrian activity, as well as public transit systems that provide viable alternatives to personal car use.

Since the housing element sets the stage for the types and locations of housing opportunities, this is a logical place to put goals and policies aimed at decreasing concentrated poverty and increasing the availability of affordable housing for vulnerable populations.

Finally, the community facilities element is the place for goals and policies that set standards for public safety service and adequate access to parks and open space. This element is also a place to address access to healthy food through grocery stores and community gardens.

A Health Element

For some communities, a new health element may be an effective way to place special emphasis on the importance of goals and policies that support public health. Moreover, there are some issues, such as food access, that may not fit neatly in existing elements.

However, when creating a new health element, it is important to carefully review the other elements of the plan to make sure they support the new element's goals and policies. For example, if the health element expresses a desire to encourage increased physical activity by providing compact, mixed use environments, the land-use element should be updated to detail appropriate locations for increased density or a mix of uses.

Conclusion

Protecting public health has always been an explicit purpose of both planning in general and, more specifically, the comprehensive plan. However, until recently, most comprehensive plans neglected to emphasize certain connections between community design and health outcomes. After making these connections explicit during the visioning phase of the planning process, each community has a choice about how best to integrate health-supportive goals and policies in its comprehensive plan. While some cities and counties may elect to use health as an organizing theme for the plan, others may choose to adopt a new plan element. In either case, integrating health into the comprehensive plan is an important way for planners to make sure future growth and change leads to healthier communities for all.

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