



# Working with Elected Officials to Promote Healthy Land Use Planning & Community Design

*Once health officials and planners begin collaborating, they must work to influence policies and regulations in order to promote sustainable growth patterns that will contribute to the health and overall quality of life of their communities.*

## Background

The impact of the built environment on the public's health continues to be explored by leading national organizations. However, it is at the local level, where communities are planned, that it is imperative for practitioners to take a proactive approach to addressing this link. Forging relationships between health officials and planners is the first step. Once these groups are educated about these issues and have begun to work together to create healthier communities, it is crucial to engage local elected officials in order to garner the support needed to institute policy changes that will influence the design and health of the community. Cultivating support from elected officials, including the board of health, planning commission, zoning board, mayor, or county commissioners will serve to greatly improve your efforts to institute overarching changes in your community. While many changes can be initiated through a planning and health agency partnership, there are many policies and recommendations that need to be more formally adopted and will be more successful with the support of elected officials.

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*"No matter how much the local official may want to shape projects into a more livable community project, if they don't have a basis and authority in code, they can't do it. It only leaves them the option of negotiation with the developer, but the developer doesn't have to do it."*

## Who are the Partners?

While each municipality is different, there are categories of elected officials that are common to many areas. Clearly, a mayor would be an elected official whom it would be beneficial to have on your side. But there are many others who are in positions to help advocate for the public health cause, as well as to actually institute change. City councils, local planning commissions, local zoning boards of appeals (ZBA), county commissioners, and local boards of health are elected (or appointed by elected officials) and can wield substantial power over city rules and regulations. Local ZBAs hear appeals from decisions of zoning enforcement officers and building inspectors, interpret zoning laws and review applications for variances and other types of permits. Many Planning Commissions have as their main

role the adoption of a Comprehensive Plan and may serve many additional advisory functions, such as drafting zoning provisions. They provide an impartial perspective on land use issues while keeping in mind the long-range needs of the community as set forth by the Comprehensive Plan. Most local boards of health are affiliated with the health agency in their jurisdiction. Local boards of health are often responsible for recommending health policy; proposing, adopting, and enforcing public health regulations; and recommending health department budgets and priorities.<sup>2</sup> These and other elected officials can serve to work toward building healthier communities when fully informed and included in the collaborative activities early on.

*"We need to move towards providing information up front and guidance as far as public health issues to be considered in the process, so that we don't just have the opportunity to come in at the tail end when changes are most likely not going to occur."*<sup>1</sup>

## Developing Strategies

The connection between land use and public health can be a gray area for those unfamiliar with the implications of the built environment on personal and community health status. Therefore, public health officials and planners can take preventive measures to dispel any ambiguity by outlining a clear health message that highlights the concerns relative to planning issues. The message should reflect the concerns relative to planning issues. The message should reflect community needs and interests that address specific policy issues but also reflect other issues that local public health agencies (LPHAs) and planning agencies feel are important. Planners and public health practitioners should work together to establish agreed upon goals and objectives that are easily defined. These are statements that describe what you hope to accomplish and how you plan to do so. Having predetermined goals and objectives will allow others to better understand why your message is important and how it will be accomplished.

*As with so much of this work, it's about relationships.*

Partnerships of planners and health officials (the Partners) must first lay the groundwork by educating local elected officials and community members about health and the built environment in terms of the role of primary prevention. They must make it clear that land use and transportation planning are legitimate areas of concern for the public health sector, and vice versa.





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## Roles for the LPHA and Planning Agencies

It is important that the Partners have specific goals and objectives when approaching elected officials and that they clearly state how decisions about the built environment relate to certain health and community issues. Further, it is crucial to work with and educate the community before trying to implement change. Planning is to be done “with” and “for” the community rather than “to” the community. Help them to understand the importance of integrating health needs into their overall vision for the community.

- Arm yourself with data, local or national, and be prepared to share it with advocates and others to help in making the public health argument.
- Build support from the community and business owners through an extensive education process on the benefits of [smart growth](#).
- Educate elected officials about the public health implications of land use and transportation planning choices, including the economic burden of associated health costs.
- Nurture one-on-one relationships with elected officials whenever possible so that they have your agency in mind when they are seeking information and input.
- Enlist buy-in and support from community members who can be active advocates, especially surrounding highly politicized issues.
- Engage your Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO).<sup>3</sup> MPOs are responsible for transportation planning and often have access to money not available to health or planning agencies. Click [here](#) to find your area’s MPO.
- Make use of the volunteer power of civic groups, who can monitor and influence elected officials. Make presentations to educate these groups on the importance of the public health message so that they may include it in their issue positions and agendas.
- Develop educational materials that locals can use to educate a variety of audiences, such as PowerPoint presentations that locals can take to city council meetings or hearings.
- Work with local chapters of national organizations such as APA chapters, 1000 Friends, and so on.
- Be visible and consistent: attend meetings of the ZBA, the city council, neighborhood associations, etc. A familiar face builds credibility and trust when information is presented.

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- Be vocal. Do not be afraid to speak up. The health message will resonate with everybody, as it becomes something personal that we can all relate to.

*“We have to link with something bigger than we are.”*

- Take elected officials on a walking audit of the community and point out where and how areas need to be improved.
- Provide real life stories of local people and how the built environment has impacted their health and well-being. Putting a name and face to the problem can put the issue into perspective.
- Planners and health practitioners can approach elected officials with specific projects, especially those of a large-scale, and present them with the health impacts, both positive and negative.
- Send press releases and newspaper articles to elected officials to illustrate show them that these issues are of concern to the community at large.
- Develop sound bites that are catchy and easy to remember. These will keep your issue on the radar screens of residents and the media.

For tools and resources to help you educate others about the important link between the built environment and public health, log on to NACCHO’s land use planning Web site at: [www.naccho.org/project84.cfm](http://www.naccho.org/project84.cfm).

Let us know about your successes collaborating with your local planner or elected official! E-mail us at [jsolomon@naccho.org](mailto:jsolomon@naccho.org).

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Quotes are taken from a series of focus groups conducted by NACCHO addressing collaboration, health disparities, traffic safety and injury prevention. The focus group reports are available on NACCHO’s Land Use Planning Web page at: [www.naccho.org/project84.cfm](http://www.naccho.org/project84.cfm).

<sup>2</sup> The National Association of Local Boards of Health. “About Local Boards of Health.” Retrieved May 28, 2004, from [www.nalboh.org/publications/aboutlboh.PDF](http://www.nalboh.org/publications/aboutlboh.PDF).

<sup>3</sup> Each urbanized area with a population of 50,000 or more is required to have a designated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) with the responsibility of conducting a continuing, cooperative and comprehensive transportation planning process if they are to spend federal money on transportation improvements.