

Creating Healthier Suburbs


Tools for Transforming Sprawl into Livable Communities

A Guide for Public Health Advocates



ChangeLab Solutions

Law & policy innovation for the common good.



Think “suburbia” and certain images spring to mind: acres of single-family homes tucked into cul-de-sacs, shopping malls with expansive parking lots, sprawling office parks surrounded by cars. While real-life suburbs don’t always fit this image, most communities built in America since World War II have followed a suburban development pattern – that is, they were designed around the idea that cars would be the primary mode of transportation, and that where we live should be physically separated from the places where we work, play, and go to school. Our transportation, urban planning, and banking policies have all encouraged suburban development – through new financial tools for first-time homebuyers, mass-produced housing, and our extensive interstate highway system.

While suburbanization promised relief from the overcrowded conditions in major cities before World War II, suburban development also resulted in unanticipated environmental, social, and health consequences. Today millions of Americans live in conditions we now call “sprawl”: inefficient, poorly designed communities that are ill-equipped to provide residents with access to the resources they need to lead healthier lives. With great distances separating jobs, housing, retail, and services, people have become heavily reliant on cars – seldom walking, biking, or taking public transportation, options that promote physical activity. What’s more, these development patterns can exacerbate residential segregation, waste local resources, and pollute the environment.

There are strategies suburban communities can adopt to limit the negative impacts of sprawl. Advocates – whether that means staff at a local health department, members of a community-based organization, or a group of concerned neighborhood residents – can work with local policymakers and planning agencies to support healthy development in suburban communities.

Sprawl Affect Health?

Many critics of sprawl focus solely on its environmental consequences, since these communities generally consume more resources than their urban counterparts.¹ But sprawl also can affect human health:



More time spent driving means fewer opportunities for healthy activities. Residents in sprawling communities may have to devote significant time and money on transportation to get to work, stores, and services. That leads to greater stress, fewer opportunities for exercise, and less disposable income to spend on necessities, such as healthy food or medical care.^{2,3} Research shows that every additional hour spent in a car per day is associated with a 6 percent higher chance of being obese.⁴



Car-centric street design discourages walking and bicycling, and increases the risk of traffic crashes. Suburban streets are rarely designed with the pedestrian or bicyclist in mind; they may lack sidewalks or crosswalks, bike paths, pedestrian-oriented lighting, and other amenities that make walking or biking safe and pleasant.⁵ Instead, these types of streets maximize the flow of traffic, encouraging higher driving speeds and increasing the risk of serious injuries or fatalities to motorists, bicyclists, and pedestrians.⁶



Inefficient development pollutes our natural environment and threatens farmland and open space.

In the United States, traffic-related air pollution is responsible for 27 percent of greenhouse gas emissions and more than 40,000 premature deaths annually.^{7,8} Meanwhile, the loss of farmland and open space due to sprawl threatens our food supply and damages our air, water, and forests. Between 1982 and 2007, we lost more than 23 million acres of agricultural land to development, almost 40 percent of which was land especially well suited to growing food crops and in close proximity to existing communities.⁹



Sprawling development threatens a community's fiscal sustainability. Neighborhoods with dispersed housing and commercial developments consume more resources per capita than denser areas: more electricity and fuel, more paved roads and utility lines, and more services like schools, libraries, and police departments. While building and maintaining these systems might seem financially viable during periods of economic growth, sprawling infrastructure is costly to maintain in the long run and can diminish communities' ability to weather economic shocks.^{10,11}



Residential segregation heightens economic, social, and health disparities. As upper- and middle-class residents fled cities and moved to suburbs over the last half-century, suburban towns enjoyed an ample tax base that supported high-quality services, while urban neighborhoods languished and shrank in population, reinforcing racial and class disparities. Today, the trend is shifting: real estate demand in central cities is growing, putting pressure on low- and middle-income households to move outward and contributing to a dramatic rise in the number of suburban residents living in poverty.¹² These “suburban poor” are especially vulnerable to the negative health impacts of sprawl, living greater distances from jobs and services and other health-promoting resources than their urban counterparts. Outlying suburbs have also been among the communities hardest hit by the recent foreclosure crisis, which has impoverished families and city governments alike.

This is where advocates come in. By partnering with local agencies – planning, transportation, economic development and redevelopment – public health advocates can help shape policies that promote healthier suburban communities.

NOW Suburban Sprawl Hinders Healthy Living

HOW We Can Retrofit Sprawl and Improve Residents' Lives

Good news! Sprawling suburbs can be retrofitted to better meet all residents' needs, from nutritious food to housing, jobs, schools, and recreation. Here are some ways to make suburbs healthier and more livable.

► Retrofit existing town centers and shopping centers to create vibrant, walkable environments.

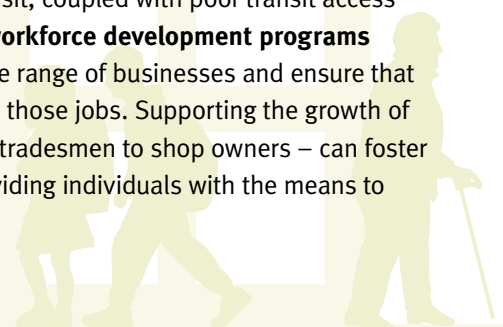
NOW Where suburban sprawl is the norm, workplaces, schools, shops, and recreational opportunities are often miles apart from one another, and the main way people get from one place to the next is by driving.

HOW In suburban and town centers with good sidewalks and densely packed businesses, people are much more likely to walk between destinations. Surveys show that prospective homebuyers are actually willing to buy a smaller house if it allows them to be close to public transit and a walkable, vibrant commercial area.¹³ Existing neighborhood centers, shopping centers, and malls can provide a starting point for creating vibrant community hubs. City and county planning departments can encourage these **mixed-use neighborhoods** – places where housing, businesses, and services are integrated within a compact area – by updating building codes, **zoning regulations** and **comprehensive plans** (also known as *general plans* or *growth policies*) to reflect the community's vision. Ideally, communities will concentrate buildings in **transit-oriented developments**, places that are easily accessed by major transit routes. To enlist real estate developers, balance regulations with financial incentives that make mixed-use a viable option, such as assistance with assembling land, access to financing, and infrastructure improvements. All of these strategies can have the added benefit of generating additional foot traffic and boosting sales in local stores.¹⁴

► Promote diverse and stable jobs in transit-accessible locations.

NOW Most suburban dwellers live many miles away from urban job centers, and what jobs exist in suburbs tend to be at either extreme of the employment spectrum: professional and technical jobs in office parks, or lower-paying positions at large chain retailers that typically offer little job security. Many of these jobs are at big box shopping centers or large, isolated corporate campuses, poorly served by transit, sidewalks, and bicycle infrastructure.¹⁵

HOW Research suggests that building dense, walkable job centers that are well-connected to major transit lines is a critical way to encourage transit ridership, shorten commute times, and alleviate traffic congestion. Access to public transportation is poorer for low- and medium-skill jobs than it is for highly skilled positions, in both suburbs and cities alike. That means low- and moderate-income workers bear a double burden: lower rates of car ownership and higher dependence on public transit, coupled with poor transit access to appropriate jobs.¹⁶ **Economic** and **workforce development programs** can help communities attract a diverse range of businesses and ensure that residents have the skills needed to fill those jobs. Supporting the growth of small-business owners – from skilled tradesmen to shop owners – can foster a diversified local economy while providing individuals with the means to build a stable career.



► Create diverse mixed-income housing well integrated with jobs and services.

NOW Capitalizing on cheap undeveloped land, developers have built entire communities of oversized, uniform housing aimed at high-income buyers. Meanwhile, low- and moderate-income suburban residents must “drive ‘til they qualify” for housing they can afford, far from jobs, services, and commercial areas.

HOW Fostering diverse neighborhoods that are accessible to people of all income levels can encourage workforce stability and more livable communities, and help mitigate the many social and economic consequences of segregation and concentrated poverty.¹⁷ Government programs can help promote **mixed-income housing**, where units are set aside for lower wage-earning families alongside market-rate units. Increasingly, state and local governments have used tools such as **inclusionary zoning ordinances** and **“fair share” requirements** that require a minimum amount of affordable housing. **Zoning** and **architectural design guidelines** can also be amended to require a range of housing types, while redevelopment and housing agencies can pursue funding to make such developments a reality. It is critical that housing for low-income residents – many of whom may be transit-dependent – be located near jobs, public transportation, and shops and services.

► Build, upgrade, and reuse parks, trails, and recreation spaces.

NOW In some suburban communities, indoor and outdoor recreational spaces may be in bad repair, or reachable only by car. Even if they are located within a reasonable distance, they may be disconnected from public transit and safe, walkable streets and thus unreachable by children, the elderly, and people with impaired mobility.

HOW Cities and counties can ensure that their **parks & open space master plans, comprehensive plans, redevelopment plans**, and other neighborhood plans are funded and reflect the community’s vision of a network of high-quality recreational facilities integrated with pedestrian, bike, and transit facilities. Communities can update zoning to encourage **urban agriculture** on parks or undeveloped city lots, which serve as recreational spaces in addition to providing educational opportunities and free or affordable produce. Local governments can also require real estate developers to set aside funding and land to upgrade or construct parks. An especially cost-effective way to use existing infrastructure is to establish **joint use agreements** – for instance, a community center and a school could arrange to open school playgrounds to the public on weekends.

► Upgrade and build roads that are safe and accessible for pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit.

NOW Broadly speaking, typical suburban development is geared primarily to the needs of motorists, with plenty of paved parking lots, wide streets, and narrow or nonexistent sidewalks.

HOW **“Complete streets” policies** make sure roads are designed so that everyone can use them safely and easily – transit users, bicyclists and pedestrians, and motorists alike. Retrofitting streets could include using “road diets” (reducing the number of vehicle lanes), enlarging and improving sidewalks, and adding features like bicycle lanes and crosswalks. It may be easier for advocates to secure pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure on roads scheduled to be repaved in the near future, when these improvements may be cheaper to build. Ideally, such improvements will be guided by a local **bicycle and pedestrian master plan** or comprehensive plan that outlines the community’s vision for improving accessibility and connectivity.

► Encourage the smart use – and reuse – of infrastructure.

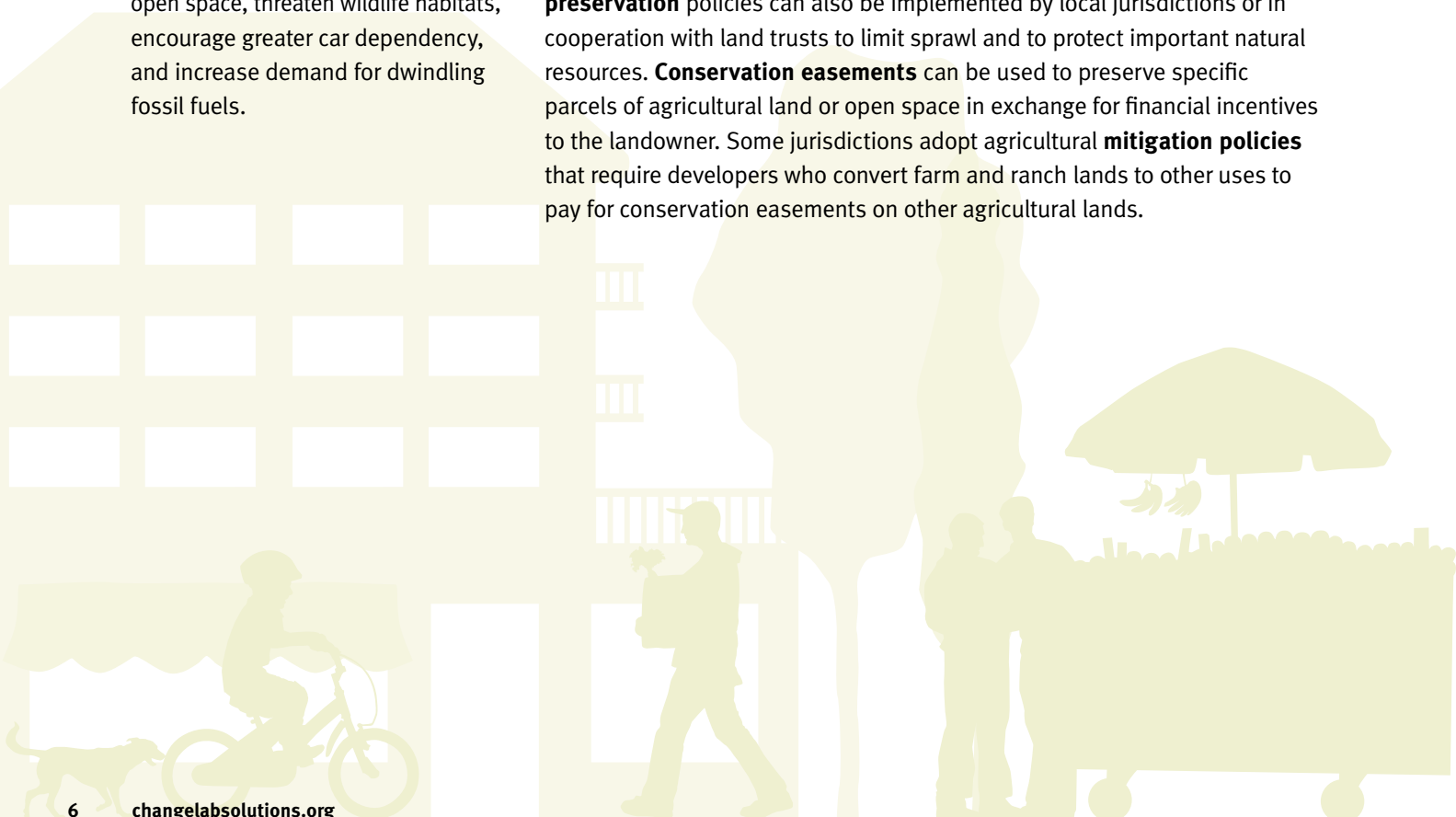
NOW In many regions, sprawling development patterns have stretched infrastructure systems to capacity. A community might have more houses than it can adequately supply with existing water or sewer services, for example, or students dispersed over so many miles of housing that there is no logical place to site a new school.

HOW Local agencies should prioritize development in areas where it would strengthen existing public transit networks, support the creation of a strong commercial center, and minimize the strain on infrastructure budgets. **Infill development** – in which pockets of vacant or underutilized land are “reused” – seeks to remedy these issues by encouraging development where services like police stations, schools, and paved roads already exist. For instance, a community might prioritize development on a downtown main street over projects that would create new shopping centers. Local governments have a range of tools that could incentivize infill development: for example, they could update zoning codes, provide density bonuses, expedite permit review processes, provide financing or tax abatement, and update aging infrastructure. Similarly, communities can discourage building in inefficient locations through appropriately-sized **development fees (also known as impact fees)**, which require that developers pay a sum equivalent to the cost of providing infrastructure and services to the new development.

► Preserve farmland and other open space.

NOW When housing subdivisions are built on farmland and other open land (which has been the typical pattern for many suburbs), communities lose irreplaceable land for food production and precious open space, threaten wildlife habitats, encourage greater car dependency, and increase demand for dwindling fossil fuels.

HOW Regardless of which policy is used, strong planning and zoning policies form an essential foundation upon which other farmland and open space protections can be built. One of the most effective methods to protect open space around cities is to establish **urban growth boundaries**, which keep development within core city growth areas and away from critical farmland and other natural resources. Other **conservation and farmland preservation** policies can also be implemented by local jurisdictions or in cooperation with land trusts to limit sprawl and to protect important natural resources. **Conservation easements** can be used to preserve specific parcels of agricultural land or open space in exchange for financial incentives to the landowner. Some jurisdictions adopt agricultural **mitigation policies** that require developers who convert farm and ranch lands to other uses to pay for conservation easements on other agricultural lands.



Bridging the Gap Between Planning & Health

Local governments, businesses, community-based organizations, and residents all have an important role to play in creating healthier suburbs. Public health advocates are well positioned to bring to the table all parties affected by suburban sprawl: the elected officials whose buy-in is critical for changing local policies, the residents whose health is affected by development decisions, and the experts who can attest to the health and economic benefits of mixed-use development and open-space preservation. Here are some ways for public health advocates to get involved:



Share information with elected officials, local agencies, and community members about the connection between health and neighborhood design. A few compelling statistics can help these stakeholders understand that their health is directly affected by the design of the environment around them. Share with them facts about sprawl's negative effects on their health, and balance those facts with examples of how communities have implemented changes and realized health and economic gains as a result.



Work with key decision-makers in the planning process. Local governments and planning agencies know their region intimately but may not be aware of residents' health priorities. Advocates can help open their eyes to different ways of looking at suburban development by contacting local officials to voice their opinions, providing agency and public comment on the health impacts of development proposals, mobilizing community residents to attend meetings about upcoming planning projects, or applying to be part of the volunteer boards and commissions that oversee planning agencies' work.



Find partners who are also working to advance healthier suburban communities. Local organizations, coalitions, and businesses working toward a similar goal can make valuable allies. Creating a broad-based coalition of stakeholders will allow you to pool your resources and learn from each other, while increasing the likelihood that your goals will be well received by policymakers.



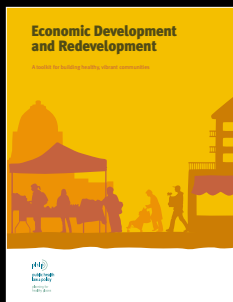
Convene, join, or push for an inter-regional, interagency roundtable or task force. The range of agencies and entities involved in community planning can benefit from additional opportunities to share resources and knowledge. Public health advocates can bridge the gap among them by helping them understand how all policy decisions affect health.



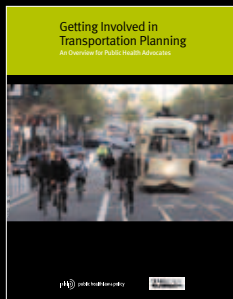
Publicize examples of successful community planning and redevelopment projects. Provide testimony and stories about how similar communities have implemented changes and the positive changes they have seen in terms of a broadened tax base, health improvements, or overall better quality of life. Write letters to the editors of local publications about planning successes, pitch stories to local journalists, and use social media tools like Facebook and Twitter to share news and information.

For more resources:

ChangeLab Solutions can work with you to determine the planning and policy tools best suited to encourage healthier suburban development in your community. Our team of urban planners and attorneys can provide trainings, answer questions, and help draft or review policy language to help meet your health goals. For more information, visit our website: www.changelabsolutions.org.



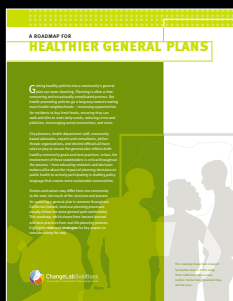
Economic Development and Redevelopment



Getting Involved in Transportation Planning



Partners for Public Health



A Roadmap for Healthier General Plans

Endnotes

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ChangeLab Solutions is a nonprofit organization that provides legal information on matters relating to public health. The legal information in this document does not constitute legal advice or legal representation. For legal advice, readers should consult a lawyer in their state.

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