

Getting Involved in Transportation Planning

An Overview for Public Health Advocates



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Why should public health professionals be involved in transportation planning?

Because the way our roads and public transit systems are designed has a lot to do with our health: it influences how much exercise we get, our exposure to noise and air pollution, our risk of getting into traffic accidents, and more. This fact sheet discusses the important link between transportation planning and health, describes the key players and processes of local and regional transportation planning, and suggests steps you can take to advocate effectively for healthier transportation policies.



Making the Connection: Public Health and Transportation



PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

In this country about 92% of all trips are made by automobile, and the average person spends 443 hours in a car each year.³ These findings are directly linked to rising rates of obesity and other chronic illnesses: a study found that for every hour spent each day in a car, a person's risk of being obese increased 6%, while obesity risk decreased 5% for every hour walked each day.⁴



ACCESS TO SERVICES

The need to travel a long distance from home to essential goods and services is an especially dire problem in low-income and people-of-color communities, where people are more likely to be dependent on public transportation. Residents of low-income communities are less likely than their more affluent counterparts to own a car but also three times less likely to live within walking distance of a grocery store.⁵



TRAFFIC INJURIES & FATALITIES

In 2006, automobile crashes in the United States caused more than 37,000 fatalities and 3.4 million nonfatal injuries. For children and young adults, automobile crashes are the leading cause of death.^{6,7}

What Is Transportation Planning?

Transportation planning involves creating safe, efficient, and sustainable ways to move pedestrians, bicyclists, transit riders, and drivers from one area to another.

While transportation planning has long centered around the concept of “mobility” (moving people from place to place), recent focus has begun shifting to “access,” or ensuring that people can easily reach jobs, education, and other daily needs.

Transportation planners design our streets and sidewalks, highways, and public transit networks. Agency decisions are made at all levels, from the city to the federal government. Their choices have a significant impact on chronic disease rates, air quality, and equitable access to services and economic opportunities. Transportation planning decisions can help improve residents' health by promoting bicycling and walking, focusing on access to food shopping and other daily needs (especially for vulnerable populations such as low-income, elderly, and disabled), and conceiving of neighborhoods as destinations rather than funnels for cars and other vehicles.

Transportation planning funds come from the federal government and state, regional, and local agencies. During the 1950s and '60s, when the majority of our interstate highway system was built, state and federal gasoline taxes were sufficient to cover the full costs of road construction. But gas taxes have not kept pace with inflation, forcing local and regional governments to seek other sources of funding, such as bonds or local taxes, to maintain and expand transportation systems.

In more urbanized areas, local governments have been able to create more funding sources to meet transportation goals. Only a third of the Bay Area's transportation budget, for example, comes from the federal and state government combined.¹ By contrast, in rural communities, where local and regional agencies issue fewer taxes and bonds, federal and state government funding may account for as much as two-thirds of the budget for transportation spending.²

Who Makes Transportation Planning Happen?

Transportation planning works at three different levels: local (city), county, and regional.

Local Government

Local governments control what happens on neighborhood streets, set standards for how local land can be used, and secure funding for transportation projects and programs.

Key Players

The **Department of Public Works** (or occasionally **Department of Transportation**) designs, builds, and maintains roadways and sidewalks, pedestrian plazas, bicycle facilities, and traffic signals on locally owned roads.

The **Department of Parks and Recreation** designs, builds, and maintains pedestrian and bicycle facilities, and parks and open spaces within its jurisdiction.

The **Planning Department** develops zoning codes for land uses and policies on access to buildings and properties, sets parking minimums for developments, and approves site plans for housing developments.

Local elected officials champion and secure funding for projects and help set local policies on transportation performance standards and environmental initiatives.

Process

The two most important types of process to track are: **the city's own transportation policies**, and the **funding requests** submitted to higher levels of government. Transportation policies are often reflected in a local general plan (and, if available, in bicycle and pedestrian plans), which shows how much priority the city places on providing space and access for cars, bicyclists, and pedestrians. Available funding sources also drive decisions on which projects are ultimately built. In addition to projects they complete with funds they control, cities also submit lists of projects to higher levels of government to be included in transportation funding plans.

County Congestion Management Agencies (CMAs)

In 1990, California voters passed Proposition 111, doubling the state gas tax, directing the funds to the state Congestion Management Program, and shifting the responsibility for much transportation decision-making from the state to the regional level. This law required urban counties to create a Congestion Management Agency (CMA) to coordinate transportation planning, land use, and air quality measures to reduce traffic congestion and reliance on motor vehicle use. The funding priorities CMAs set through their countywide plans have a significant effect on local decisions.

Key Players

In many California counties, the CMA also administers the county's transportation sales tax. CMAs have dedicated **staff**, with a **board** usually made up of city/county elected officials and, in some cases, agency staff or representatives of local transit agencies. CMAs frequently have issue-specific **technical advisory committees** (for example, focused on bicycle/pedestrian issues or paratransit).

Process

Every four to six years, each CMA updates its long-range Countywide Transportation Plan (CWTP), outlining a vision and set of investment priorities for the county's long-term future (generally 20 to 30 years). These plans are often the basis of the county's input to a Regional Transportation Plan, a plan that articulates long-term growth patterns for the entire region (often multicounty areas) developed by a Metropolitan Planning Organization (see next section).

More frequently, the CMA also decides on a set of investments, usually drawn from the CWTP, to fund through county fees (for example, a half-cent sales tax), state or federal funding (through inclusion in an RTIP), or a combination of both. In addition to developing plans, CMAs advocate for and deliver regional funds to local governments and transit agencies, and participate in shaping regional transportation policy.

The most crucial time to get involved is when a county plans to ask for voter approval of a new half-cent sales tax for transportation or a renewal of an existing measure. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to guide the spending (sometimes of billions of dollars) of

entirely flexible funds. And the projects and programs defined in these plans typically shape how the county – and sometimes the region – will invest other funds for the next 20 to 30 years.⁸

Unfortunately, some observers express concerns that CMAs focus more on highway expansion to manage congestion rather than encouraging multiple transportation modes to provide access. And most CMAs are subject to less public scrutiny than local governments or even regional agencies, which can limit oversight and make it difficult to track how and when decisions are made.

Regional Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs)

A Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) is a federally mandated and funded policy-making and planning organization. In California the majority of federal funds are controlled directly by MPOs, with only a small amount retained at the state level. More than 90 percent of Californians live in the jurisdiction of one of the four largest MPOs⁹ (Southern California, San Francisco Bay Area, Sacramento, and San Diego). An MPO has four key functions – long-term planning, short-term allocations of funding, advocacy at state and federal levels, and coordination of activities around the region – plus the overarching responsibility to involve the public in decision-making processes.¹⁰

Key Players

MPO staff (planners and engineers) generally play a significant role in defining the direction of regional policies and priorities. Each MPO has a **board or commission** that guides its work, with members typically representing the counties and cities in the region (sometimes advised by representatives from area transit or state and federal agencies). Most MPOs also have a **citizen advisory committee** and occasionally issue-specific **technical advisory committees** (similar to CMAs).

Process

Every four years, each MPO develops a Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) that outlines a long-term vision (20+ years) and sets investment priorities for transportation projects and programs. California's landmark greenhouse gas reduction law, SB 375, requires the state to set greenhouse gas reduction targets for each region. Each MPO prepares a Sustainable Communities Strategy (SCS) that demonstrates how the region will meet its reduction targets. Once adopted, the SCS will be incorporated into the RTP.

MPOs also use the RTP to guide allocations of specific funding sources, whose revenues originate anywhere from the regional to the federal levels, typically in two-to-three-year cycles.

The MPO planning process provides many opportunities for participation, from hearings and workshops to soliciting public comments on draft RTPs.

Getting Involved

Transportation planners need your input and expertise to help promote biking and walking, reduce traffic injuries, and improve access to grocery stores and other daily needs.

Public health advocates can educate and influence decision-makers at all levels of government – making the connection between transportation and health clear, explaining the impact of transportation investments, and keeping leaders accountable for priorities reflected in local and regional planning processes.



Assess Current Plans

Include healthier transportation goals. Do land use policies support dense, walkable neighborhoods? Do street design standards reflect all users? Can residents access quality public transit to reach jobs and essential services? Regional Transportation Plans and local plans should address the distinct needs of young, elderly, disabled, and low-income residents, who have the fewest transportation options. Discretionary funds should be prioritized for bicycle, pedestrian, and public transit systems rather than new roads. Long-term plans should prioritize improvements to mobility, air quality, land use, and economic objectives.



Build or Support a Coalition

Find like-minded advocates who are interested in advocating for health in transportation. Likely allies include advocates working on climate change, active transportation, public transit, and social justice. **Reach out to potential partners** and draw attention to your advocacy campaign by using the media to amplify your message. Media outreach can include pitching stories to a local journalist, writing letters to the editor, or using social media.



Make a Case for Health

Educate elected officials, planners, and other policymakers about the links between transportation and health. Encourage MPOs to prioritize data collection during the planning process, especially on pedestrians, bicyclists, people with disabilities, and low-income communities. Urge transportation agencies to coordinate their efforts with land use and economic development agencies, public health departments, and social service providers.



Attend Community Planning Meetings

Participate in regional and local community meetings and workshops. At a regional level, the California Department of Transportation has a comprehensive list of MPOs throughout the state; find yours at <http://1.usa.gov/ioc7SJ>. Locally, check the planning department's website or bulletin board for upcoming community meetings (this department is sometimes referred to as "community development").



Work to Improve Standards

Prioritize alternate transportation and walkability through design standards and metrics. Ensure that MPOs' project and funding priorities are consistent with the California Complete Streets Act of 2008 (AB 1358). Both the regional MPOs and county CMAs can adopt stronger safety performance measures that fully consider the needs of pedestrians and bicyclists. Work with your local and regional decision-makers to craft a set of health guidelines that can be used to better evaluate potential projects; Health Impact Assessment, for example, can identify how transportation projects affect a community.



1 Metropolitan Transportation Commission. Transportation 2035 Plan. P. 35, 2008.

2 Council of Fresno County Governments. 2004 Regional Transportation Plan. 5: 11-14, 2008.

3 Frank LD, Sallis JF, Conway T, Chapman J, Saelens B, and Bachman W. "Many Pathways from Land Use to Health: Associations between Neighborhood Walkability and Active Transportation, Body Mass Index, and Air Quality." *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 72(1): 75-87, 2006.

4 Ewing R, Frank L, and Kreutzer R. "Understanding the Relationship Between Public Health and the Built Environment: A Report to the LEED-ND Core Committee." 2006.
Available at: www.cnu.org/sites/www.cnu.org/files/leed_public_health.pdf.

5 Humpel N, Marshall AL, Leslie E, Bauman A, and Owen N. "Changes in Neighborhood Walking are Related to Changes in Perceptions of Environmental Attributes." *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 27(1): 60-67, 2004.

6 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Fatality Analysis Reporting System. 2006.

7 Leyden, KM. "Social Capital and the Built Environment: The Importance of Walkable Neighborhoods." *American Journal of Public Health*, 93(9): 1546-51, 2003.

8 TransForm (formerly known as Transportation and Land Use Coalition). *Access Now: A Guide to Winning the Transportation Your Community Needs*. P. 50-56, 2004.
Available at: <http://transformca.org/files/reports/access-now.pdf>.

9 The four largest Regional Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) are (1) Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG), (2) San Francisco Bay Area's Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC), (3) Sacramento Area Council of Governments (SACOG), and (4) San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG).

10 TransForm (formerly known as Transportation and Land Use Coalition). *Access Now: A Guide to Winning the Transportation Your Community Needs*. P. 57-66, 2004.
Available at: <http://transformca.org/files/reports/access-now.pdf>.

Who Can Help

For more information about building new partnerships for healthier communities, visit www.phlpnet.org or www.TransformCA.org



ChangeLab Solutions

ChangeLab Solutions

PHLP pioneers innovative ways to leverage law and policy to improve public health. We provide a range of practical legal and policy tools – including model laws and policies, fact sheets, FAQs, and toolkits, as well as tailored trainings and one-on-one consultation – to help make healthy communities the norm, not the exception.

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TransForm

TransForm works to create world-class public transportation and walkable communities in the Bay Area and beyond. We build diverse coalitions, influence policy, and develop innovative programs to improve the lives of all people and protect the environment.

Visit us at www.TransformCA.org.

You can also contact us at our main office in Oakland, CA (510.740.3150) or at our offices in San Jose (408.406.8074) and Sacramento (916.441.0204).

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