Building a Dialogue Around Public Health and the Future of Our Communities

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The American Lung Association in California (ALA in CA) has been at the forefront of air quality and global warming policy at the state and local levels for several decades, focusing on the human health effects of air pollution. ALA in CA advocacy has raised public awareness about the severe health burdens caused by air pollution and the link between land use, transportation, public health, and climate change. A key component of this work has been building support among local elected officials for compact growth designed around walking, cycling, and transit, particularly in the Southern California region. ALA in CA organized and trained physicians and other health professionals to educate local elected leaders in Southern California on the health benefits of smart growth land use and transportation policies and helped engage them in the dialogue around land use and transportation at the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG).

This paper provides a roadmap for building a dialogue around public health and air quality as the underpinning for broad-based support of smart growth. The plan includes five main components:

1. Developing a highly visible health and medical campaign
2. Quantifying local smart growth health benefits
3. Educating local elected officials about the intersection of public health and land use
4. Advocating for healthy growth strategies and policies
5. Identifying and encouraging local government champions for smart growth

Background

On April 4, 2012, Southern California approved a visionary plan to address the sprawl, smog, and traffic that has plagued the region for generations. The new planning process, known as the Sustainable Communities Strategy, was built into the Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) as the result of a landmark state law passed in 2008. California’s Climate Protection and Sustainable Communities Act (commonly known as SB 375) set forth a vision for large metropolitan areas to undertake coordinated land use and transportation planning to achieve regional greenhouse gas reduction goals. While the planning process did not start with a focus on health goals, the health community made fundamental changes in the process, which led to strong health outcomes.
Health groups highlighted research demonstrating that designing communities for better health can help regional and local planners reduce smog, soot, and greenhouse gas emissions, along with chronic illnesses like obesity, diabetes, and heart disease, which are often overlooked in planning exercises. By highlighting the public health benefits that could be achieved with the most ambitious plan possible, the ALA in CA fostered genuine interest—and advocacy—among local elected leaders for seizing an historic opportunity to shape a healthier, more sustainable region.

**Developing a Highly Visible Health and Medical Campaign**

The ALA in CA has a long history of organizing the public health and medical community around statewide clean air and public health policy advocacy. As the Southern California regional planning process began, it was clear that the region’s notoriously smoggy air could benefit from a smart growth plan, but a strong coalition of local advocates had not been formed for regional planning. In fact, public health goals had never been included in the Regional Transportation Plan.

As SCAG began its work, it became clear to the ALA in CA that a public health advocacy campaign was lacking in the region. ALA in CA began to convene small group discussions with health allies, hosted public health webinars on smart growth and climate change, and reached out to dozens of physicians to generate a campaign for embedding public health in the planning process.

The ALA in CA helped create a coalition that eventually grew to include dozens of local health and medical organizations actively engaged in the Sustainable Communities Strategy. This demonstrated to local policymakers that SB 375 has widespread support in the public health community.

**Key Outcome:** ALA in CA coordinated outreach efforts to engage dozens of health and medical organizations in planning for the Sustainable Communities Strategy, including health departments in Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties, The Prevention Institute, Asthma Coalition of Los Angeles County, Safe Routes to Schools, Human Impact Partners, American Heart Association, local medical associations and other critical partners.

**Key Outcome:** Health partners signed joint letters and regularly testified at hearings and workshops to emphasize the importance of planning on health in the region.

**Lesson Learned:** Land use decisions are ultimately public health decisions. Reaching out to and coordinating advocacy with local health leaders who have credibility with policymakers can provide a meaningful opportunity to reframe transportation land use planning decisions into conversations about the future health of community residents.

1. **Quantifying Local Public Health Benefits of Smart Growth**

While research continues to demonstrate that community designs that offer active transportation options can reduce climate change, air pollution, and skyrocketing rates of chronic illnesses, the
ALA in CA recognized that local health data would be helpful to generate support for regional planning. Working with transportation experts, the ALA in CA developed new research on the health benefits of smart growth in Southern California. The November 2011 report *Growing Healthy in Southern California*\(^1\) compared the health costs and outcomes from passenger vehicle emissions in the region today to a 20-percent reduction in emissions due to reduced driving in the region in 2035. The ALA in CA found that reduced driving alone could help Southern California avoid nearly $1 billion in health care and other societal costs in 2035, or over $16 billion between now and 2035. Researchers continue to evaluate methodologies to quantify the public health benefits of increased physical activity linked to smart growth. This data is expected to substantially increase information on the health benefits of smart growth.

By quantifying the pollution-related asthma attacks, premature deaths, hospitalizations, and costs avoided by smart growth, ALA in CA helped elected officials champion compact communities and greater investments in active transportation. The quantification of health costs associated with smart growth provides a greater understanding of the health and societal costs and benefits of transportation and land use planning decisions.

**Key Outcome:** Referencing the ALA in CA methodology, SCAG evaluated and incorporated respiratory health benefits data into the final Sustainable Communities Strategy plan: “Auto-related air pollution contributes to a spectrum of health incidences, including cases of chronic bronchitis; respiratory and cardiovascular hospitalizations; respiratory-related ER visits; acute bronchitis; work loss days; premature mortality; asthma exacerbation; and acute, lower, and upper respiratory symptoms. Using research-based rates and valuations produced by the American Lung Association, the RTP/SCS results in a 24 percent reduction in total health incidences and saves over $1.5 billion per year in total costs.”\(^2\)

**Lesson Learned:** Providing close-to-home examples of health impacts and benefits of given land use and transportation decisions is a valuable way to bring health to the forefront. Data on health impacts and benefits alongside economic, environmental, or other indicators commonly used in planning choices is a relatable tool planning agencies can use to reach and solicit feedback from the public and policy-makers.

2. **Educating Local Elected Officials About the Intersection of Public Health and Land Use**

Many elected officials are unaware of the wide-ranging health implications of the transportation and land-use decisions they make every day or of the severe human health impacts caused by air pollution and climate change. There is often a disconnect between elected officials, land use and transportation planners, and health department staff where land use decisions are concerned. County public health officials are not often consulted about land use planning.

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Physicians and other public health professionals are valuable and credible messengers for educating local and regional elected officials about the need for policies that provide alternatives to driving and can improve community health. ALA in CA has found presentations by physicians to be a highly effective strategy for helping local elected officials understand the health benefits of sustainable communities. They often describe it as an “Ah-Ha!” moment when the connections between the built environment and chronic illnesses become clear.

In coordination with local partners, ALA in CA organized forums for regional planning staff, public health departments, community health organizations, physicians, and local elected officials. These forums allowed planners to describe their processes, health organizations to identify opportunities to improve health and equity through local planning, and local elected officials to interact with planning and health department staff. Approximately 50–70 participants attended each of the southern California forums. Similar numbers have taken part in Sacramento and Bay Area meetings. Key elected officials attended the forums, including an influential local mayor.

**Key Outcome:** In coordination with other partners, ALA in CA convened public health forums in Los Angeles and Riverside counties, bringing together local elected officials, health and medical experts, environmental partners, and regional planning staff. These forums helped to energize the health community, promote increased participation in local advocacy on the SCAG plan, and provide opportunities for dialogue between elected officials and health advocates.

**Lesson Learned:** Convening conversations between planning staff, health staff, and elected officials can be as simple as a conference call or can be expanded to a panel discussion at a forum. Helping planning staff and health staff find common ground is an important first step in forging a relationship where experts in each field can pose questions, challenge assumptions, and identify practical solutions for consideration by elected leaders.

### 3. Advocating for Healthy Growth Strategies and Policies

In response to requests for greater health and equity measures in the plan, SCAG invited public health groups to provide input on the development of performance measures for the plan to ensure that these measures were addressed. A detailed health and equity analysis of the proposed measures, coordinated and written by a coalition member organization, Human Impact Partners, was instrumental in generating discussion about how transportation planning could advance health and equity early in the process. Several groups coordinated to review and propose changes. The ALA in CA was invited to serve on an advisory committee with the SCAG executive director to guide discussions and ensure that public health was considered in the plan.

In the months leading up to the final vote on the plan, the association and health allies used direct advocacy, including organizing hundreds of letters from ALA in CA supporters to SCAG. Physician volunteers authored op-eds outlining the public health perspective. Health and medical groups signed joint statements. Public health leaders offered regular testimony before the SCAG council. Together, these efforts marked the importance of the plan as a public health imperative.
In the final committee hearing before the vote to adopt the full plan, regional representatives voted unanimously to approve a motion drafted by the ALA in CA to expand public health performance measures to include reporting on asthma and other chronic illnesses, expand health assessments of development near roadways, and monitor progress and develop mitigation strategies to improve health. The health motion was adopted as part of the complete plan on a unanimous vote of the 85 members of the regional body.

**Key Outcome:** Health and equity metrics are available for evaluation of land use and transportation planning decisions, and have been incorporated into several SB 375 regional planning processes.³

**Key Outcome:** SCAG committed to develop, track, and report on public health outcomes as the Sustainable Communities Strategy is implemented in Southern California communities.⁴

**Lesson Learned:** Providing planning agencies with ways to measure health and establishing performance indicators linked to health and safety are key opportunities to embed health analysis in decision making. While all resources may not be in place for a full-suite evaluation or modeling of health outcomes, establishing that there are ways to measure and plan for improved health is a critical first step in the process.

### 4. Identifying and Encouraging Local Government Champions for Smart Growth

Reaching out to local elected officials was an integral part of the strategy to build support for smart growth. ALA in CA identified local leaders who were most energized by the discussion of smart growth as a public health imperative. These discussions grew into a broader movement among local leaders to embrace smart growth as “healthy growth” for their constituents. The ALA in CA established a “2012 Healthy Growth Leaders” campaign as a way to formalize support for public health in the planning process, but also to recognize local leaders who took a stand for cleaner air and better health.

The ALA in CA offered local officials the opportunity to sign a statement of support for healthy growth that envisions communities built in ways that allow more choices for transit, biking or walking to connect places where people live, work, shop and play. The statement outlined several policy concepts that elected leaders would endorse in favor of healthier communities. The campaign also offered resources to local officials, including draft resolutions, public health research, and other outreach materials. An ALA in CA press release about adoption of the regional plan recognized the 2012 Healthy Growth Leaders, who are listed on the ALA in CA website as local leaders that are “championing healthier, safer and more active transportation choices to reduce asthma, obesity, and other chronic illnesses that place a heavy burden on our


children, the elderly and other vulnerable populations.”

**Key Outcome:** To date, 32 Southern California local mayors, county supervisors, and city council members signed on as 2012 Healthy Growth Leaders.

**Lesson Learned:** Building relationships with individual local officials and inviting their endorsement of a platform of common sustainable planning principles can create a sense of unity among local leaders. This unified movement can help to create forward progress and a shared drive to plan and build healthier communities their constituents deserve.

**Conclusions**

The Southern California Association of Governments took an historic step to improve public health by unanimously adopting a strong Sustainable Communities Strategy in April 2012. The work to implement that plan now moves to the local communities throughout the region and will require similar leadership and engagement of the health community.

Building a campaign in support of smart growth that includes a strong focus on air quality and public health benefits can provide a new avenue for support among policy-makers and the public. The American Lung Association in California has found that demonstrating health improvements is a valuable tool to assist in the discussion and provides advocacy opportunities that are easily understood. Land use and transportation decisions are essentially public health decisions. When public health and medical voices engage in smart growth advocacy and policymakers and the public embrace this concept, the future of our communities can be one of cleaner air and better health.

*American Lung Association in California staff appreciate the opportunity to share its experiences in the Southern California planning process:*

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