



## Healthy by Design: Creating Neighborhoods that Promote Wellness

### Background on Updating California's General Plan Guidelines

#### How Does Neighborhood Planning Impact Health?

How our cities and counties are planned affects our health. Research shows that the way in which our neighborhoods and cities are designed can increase access to healthy food and physical activity, which can impact health conditions such as asthma, diabetes, obesity, and depression. For example, researchers found that children living in close proximity to a freeway or major thoroughfare are more likely to develop asthma,<sup>i</sup> and those without a park within walking distance are less likely to be physically active.<sup>ii</sup>

To help plan and guide the development goals of cities and counties, local governments are required to establish a comprehensive, long-term general plan that embodies the vision, goals, and action needed “for the physical development of the county or city.” The Governor’s Office of Planning and Research (OPR) provides assistance to cities and counties on developing their general plans through state guidelines. The state’s guidelines are advisory, not mandatory, though they closely follow current laws.

The general planning process provides residents the opportunity to participate in decision-making and to inform the community’s environmental, economic, and social goals related to land use and development.

#### What is in a General Plan?

A general plan is an action-oriented document developed by the local government in a city or county that typically covers a 20-30 year time frame. The general plan includes goals, objectives, principles, standards, and proposals for how the city or county will be developed. Local governments have discretion as to how they choose to develop the general plan. For example, some cities develop the general plan through the mayor’s office, while others have planning departments.

While the general plan guidelines are advisory, state law requires a general plan to include the following seven elements:

- **Land Use:** outlines the general distribution of land for housing, business, open space, education, public buildings and grounds, and other categories.
- **Circulation:** identifies existing and proposed transportation routes and local public utilities and facilities.
- **Housing:** assesses current and projected housing needs for all economic segments of the community. Unlike the other elements, the housing element is subject to stricter guidelines and must be reviewed every five years.
- **Conservation:** addresses the use of natural resources, including water, soils, and rivers.
- **Open Space:** details plans for long-range preservation and conservation of open space lands, including agricultural lands, outdoor recreation, and public health and safety.
- **Noise:** informs decisions on land use to help reduce exposure to excessive noise due to the location of new roads, transit centers, and other sources of elevated noise.

- **Safety:** establishes policies and programs to protect the community from risks associated with natural hazards such as flooding or earthquakes.

Prior to adoption, there must be at least one public hearing on the general plan. Most localities appoint committees that include community members to provide input during the planning process. Each city and county is required to provide annual reports on the progress of implementing its general plan to the local legislative body, OPR, and the Department of Housing and Community Development. OPR uses these annual reports to analyze statewide trends in general plan decision making and how they relate to the state’s development goals.

**Public Health in General Plans**

While the health of residents is not an explicit factor to be considered in a general plan, many required elements implicitly address some public health needs. For example, a general plan’s open space element, which focuses on land preservation, also directs cities and counties to include a vision for outdoor recreation, public health, and safety. Additionally, in 2003, OPR included environmental justice in the state guidelines. Most recently, all cities and counties are required to update the circulation element to develop streets and roads that can be used by all residents including children, persons with disabilities, and seniors.

While most cities and counties do not have a separate element to address the health of its residents this strategy has been implemented by some jurisdictions, including the City of Richmond (See *Example 1*).<sup>iii</sup> Many other cities and counties have incorporated health-related goals into the required elements. For instance, the City of Chula Vista included Planning for Healthy Communities as a goal in its Land Use and Transportation elements (See *Example 2*).

**Example 1: Health as a Separate Element**

**The City of Richmond: Community Health and Wellness Element<sup>iv</sup>**

*Goal HL-B.* Access to Healthy Food and Nutrition. Ensure that all Richmond residents have access to affordable and nutritious food to support improved nutrition, reduced incidence of hunger, and healthy eating choices.

*Policy HL-9.* Provide adequate healthy food options in the city. Ensure that more than 75 percent of the households in the city live within a half-mile of a full-service grocery store, fresh produce market, an ethnic market, or a convenience store that stocks fresh produce.

*Policy HL-10.* Encourage convenience stores, liquor stores, and ethnic food markets to carry fresh produce. Target low-income and disadvantaged communities that have limited access to full-service grocery stores.

**Example 2: Health in Required Elements**

**The City of Chula Vista: Land Use and Transportation Element<sup>v</sup>**

*Goal:* Planning for Healthy Communities. Land use arrangements and mixes that provide access to daily needs, conveniences, and employment in a safe, inviting, and walkable environment create the underpinnings for increased physical activity. Easy and convenient access to transit and other non-auto modes of travel, especially between residential and employment centers, reduces auto usage, congestion, and the attendant impacts to air quality.

*Objective:* Support healthy lifestyles among residents through increasing opportunities for regular physical activity.

## **2013 General Plan Guidelines Update**

The state's guidelines on general plans were last updated in 2003. This year, OPR is planning to revise the General Plan Guidelines and is seeking input from diverse stakeholders and the general public. The issues that OPR would like to emphasize in the revision of the General Plan Guidelines include:

- Greenhouse gas emissions reduction and climate adaptation
- Renewable energy
- Infill development
- **Public health**
- Regional planning

## **Next Steps**

In November 2012, CPEHN and ChangeLab Solutions hosted a discussion with public health and health equity advocates to identify initial ideas and suggestions for how health should be incorporated into the state's revised General Plan Guidelines.

The following are some of the issues that participants identified that should be addressed in the revision:

- "Health" and "equity" should be inclusive and defined in the guidelines.
- Concrete goals for improving community health should be developed and accompanied by meaningful strategies.
- Public participation, particularly from disadvantaged and underserved communities, should be improved to ensure their involvement.
- The guidelines should meaningfully balance definitions, goals, objectives, and policies that are grounded in community needs, with the flexibility to meet local development needs.
- Best practices that incorporate health into general plans should be highlighted and shared in the state's General Plan Guidelines.
- Measures to evaluate the impact of development on health should be developed and encouraged by the state.
- The guidelines should highlight other current laws and initiatives that seek to improve health and how they intersect with the land use, circulation, and housing elements.

Advocates also suggested connecting to other ongoing state and local efforts seeking to improve health, including local efforts to improve access to healthy foods and green space such as Healthy Eating and Active Living zones, community-based initiatives to develop healthy neighborhoods including Building Healthy Communities, strategies to include health in state decisions such as the Health in All Policies Task Force, and policies to improve air quality by reducing greenhouse gas emissions including the Sustainable Communities Strategies as required under Senate Bill 375.

## **How to Get Involved**

CPEHN and ChangeLab Solutions are assisting the Governor's Office of Planning and Research in obtaining community input in the General Plan Guidelines revision. Get involved!

- Subscribe to OPR's listserv to receive updates: <http://www.opr.ca.gov/>
- Attend CPEHN's convenings on health and the general plan: <http://www.cpehn.org/>

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<sup>i</sup> *Near-Roadway Pollution and Childhood Asthma: Implications for Developing “Win-Win” Compact Urban Development and Clean Vehicle Strategies*, University of Southern California, 2012.

<sup>ii</sup> “California Health Interview Survey.” UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. 2007.

<sup>iii</sup> Healthy Planning Policies: A Compendium from California General Plans. ChangeLab Solutions and Bay Area Regional Health Inequities (BARHI), 2012. Available at:  
[http://changelabsolutions.org/sites/default/files/Healthy\\_Planning\\_Policies\\_Compendium\\_FINAL\\_%28CLS-20120530%29\\_090925.pdf](http://changelabsolutions.org/sites/default/files/Healthy_Planning_Policies_Compendium_FINAL_%28CLS-20120530%29_090925.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> Healthy Planning Policies, ChangeLab Solutions and BARHI. City of Richmond General Plan, available at:  
[www.ci.richmond.ca.us/index.aspx?nid=2608](http://www.ci.richmond.ca.us/index.aspx?nid=2608)

<sup>v</sup> Healthy Planning Policies, ChangeLab Solutions and BARHI. City of Chula Vista General Plan, available at:  
[www.chulavistaca.gov/city\\_services/Development\\_Services/Planning\\_Building/General\\_Plan/default.asp](http://www.chulavistaca.gov/city_services/Development_Services/Planning_Building/General_Plan/default.asp)