



February 15, 2012 - Capitol Desk

Can Regional Planning be a Health Issue?

by David Gorn

Earlier this week, Assembly member Bill Monning (D-Carmel) made a memorable appearance at a Capitol Building briefing on the health care needs and opportunities for minorities in California.

Monning held up a bright yellow plastic barrel-shaped mug by its thick handle -- it was almost a foot tall and looked like it weighed a couple of pounds.

"On the way up here, I went into an AM/PM [market], and saw this thing," Monning said, hefting the giant mug with the Too Much Good Stuff logo on it. "If you bought one of these, you'd get a free soda. They'd fill this thing up for you."

Monning was making a point about the marketing of poor-nutrition, high-sugar, empty-calorie soda pop -- which, he said, is a particular problem in low-income neighborhoods.

"This thing holds 50 fluid ounces," he said, "and that's about 40 teaspoons of sugar." That's half a cup of sugar per fill-up. "And a liter bottle of cola costs less than the equivalent amount of water," Monning said.

"This is what we're up against," he said, holding up the football-sized mug.

One of the goals of Monday's legislative briefing, organized by the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network, was to encourage advocates and the state to take a multi-pronged approach to solving health issues presented by communities of color. That includes maximizing enrollment in the state Health Benefit Exchange, ramping up support for federally qualified health centers, greater emphasis on prevention in health care and introducing healthy foods into the "food deserts" of low-income communities.

Monning has another point of attack: the state planning process itself.

AB 441, authored by Monning, takes the concept of community planning in a new direction, Monning said.

"We already have a good foundation of an environmental metric, the requirements to set broad environmental standards, but we also want to create a health metric," Monning said.

Monning's bill would create an advisory health role in regional planning decisions.

"So, when looking at developments, we should look at highway proximity to housing, we should look at building bikeways and pathways, and at building houses close to markets," Monning said. "We want to get a public health voice into every issue."

AB 441 is in the Senate Rules Committee.