

LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMISSION

1303 J St., Suite 250 Sacramento, CA 95814

www.lgc.org | www.newpartners.org

Nancy Mathison, (916) 448-1198 x330, nmathison@lgc.org

January 14, 2008

Health Experts Embrace “Smart” Community Design

National conference examines how public health and planning disciplines are working together to assure a healthier environment for community residents

A growing number of researchers and public health professionals now believe that the key to reducing obesity and getting people to exercise and eat better is to design communities that allow walking or biking and the consumption of healthy foods to be built into the patterns of everyday life – like the walk to school or the grocery store, and healthy food in the vending machine.

Over the past couple of years, public health departments around the country have been exploring how they might assure community planning that takes physical activity and healthy food access into account.

Many of these innovative public health efforts, both in California and nationally, will be highlighted at the nation’s premier smart growth conference next month, when more than 1,500 participants throughout the U.S. will attend the 7th annual ‘New Partners for Smart Growth’ conference on February 7-9 in Washington, DC.

“Smart growth is key to creating healthy communities and healthy people,” said Tracy Kolian, a policy analyst with the American Public Health Association. “This conference is an excellent opportunity for public health professionals to interact with architects, planners, politicians and others to learn about the latest trends in this burgeoning field.”

Across the country, the state of the built environment – the design of neighborhoods and man-made structures such as buildings, roads and sidewalks – is having detrimental effects on the public’s health, from alarming obesity rates and incidences of diabetes among children (9 million obese kids in the U.S. today) to chronic disease and injuries among the elderly. The frustration with this design problem – and the added pounds that come from it - shows up in one of the most frequent complaints that residents have about their communities – having to drive themselves and their kids everywhere. The nation’s obesity crisis can also find its root causes in the car’s close friend – the fast-food restaurant that evolved with the rise of our auto-dominated culture. In some lower-income communities, people don't have access to healthy foods and must depend upon fast-food restaurants for their meals.

“We want doctors to know how they might use their standing in the community to help shape healthier neighborhoods for people to live,” said Judy Corbett, executive director of the Local Government Commission, the conference’s host.

The “New Partners for Smart Growth” conference will have multiple sessions that offer strategies and tools for addressing the challenges of designing and building places that provide opportunities to engage in physical activity and expand access to healthy foods for all residents.

“There is strong and growing evidence that healthy community design leads to healthy, more active and more socially connected people,” said Loel Solomon Kaiser Permanente’s National Director for Community Health Initiatives and Evaluation.

The conference begins with a day-long workshop on the links between public health and the built environment in “Promoting Healthy Eating and Active Living through Improvements in the Built Environment: What Health Professionals Need to Know and What They Can Do.” The forum will review the environmental causes of our nation's obesity crisis and explore skills to help health professionals

create communities with increased physical activity opportunities and access to healthy food. Elected officials, city planners and developers will share how physicians might get involved in the land use process. Dr. Andrew Dannenberg, a medical epidemiologist with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, will be one of the speakers.

The conference will honor with this year's New Partners for Smart Growth Lifetime Achievement Award the work of Dr. Richard Jackson, former California State Public Health Officer and director of the CDC's National Center for Environmental Health. According to Jackson, the biggest factor in the health/obesity crisis may lie in the simple principle of who – or rather, what – we build our cities for. Communities are planned for cars, not for people, for driving, not walking.

“We can create environments that can be much smarter in terms of protecting the planet, protecting human well-being and, in the long run, protecting the economy and prosperity, said Dr. Jackson.

This year, the conference even includes a health and nutrition tour, where “Smart Growth Meets Smart Food.” The Washington, DC metropolitan area is full of opportunities for linking farmers to urban and suburban consumers, including scenic Loudoun County, VA, one of the nation's top 10 fastest-growing counties, and neighboring Montgomery County, MD – a national model for farmland preservation.

Other conference sessions devoted to health topics include:

- “Making the Connections: Climate Change, Public Health and Smart Growth”
- “Health Equity, Environmental Justice and the Built Environment”
- “The Latest Research on the Relationship Between the Built Environment and Public Health”
- “Collaborative Strategies for Health Professionals and Planners”
- “Analyzing the Health Impacts of Planning Projects”
- “Planning to Eat Well: Creating Healthy Food Environments”
- “Improving Access to Parks, Trails and Recreation Facilities”

About the conference

The New Partners for Smart Growth conference, hosted at the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel by the Local Government Commission, spans three days, covering cutting-edge smart growth issues, the latest research, implementation tools and strategies, successful case studies, new projects and new policies. The conference will feature 300 speakers, more than 100 sessions and 14 tours of local model projects.

Conference sponsors include Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Kaiser Permanente, the National Association of REALTORS®, Smart Growth Network, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Health-related cosponsors also include the American Heart Association, the National Association of County and City Health Officials, the American College of Sports Medicine, the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, the National Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity, the Society for Public Health Education and the Prevention Institute. For more details about the agenda, speakers, sponsors and tours: www.newpartners.org

The Local Government Commission is a 28-year-old nonprofit membership organization of locally elected officials, city and county staff, and other interested individuals. It helps local officials address the problems facing their communities and maximize their civic, environmental and economic resources. The Ahwahnee Principles for Livable Communities, developed by the LGC in 1991, helped pave the way for the smart growth movement.