

LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMISSION

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Health Experts Embrace “Smart” Community Design

National conference highlights how public health and planning disciplines are working together to provide a healthier environment for their residents

New Partners for Smart Growth Conference; January 22-24, Albuquerque Conference Center

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.

In recent years, public health departments around the country have been exploring how they might assure that community planners and policy makers take physical activity and healthy food access into account. Many such innovative public health efforts will be highlighted at the nation’s premier smart growth event later this month, when the 8th annual New Partners for Smart Growth conference gathers at the Conference Center in Albuquerque, NM, on January 22-24.

“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. In some lower-income communities, people don’t have access to healthy foods but must depend upon fast-food restaurants to meet their nutritional needs.

“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.

A number of the conference sessions and workshops will offer strategies and tools for addressing the challenges of designing and building places that provide opportunities to engage in physical activity – places that actually encourage it – 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 for health professionals on the links between public health and 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 teach health professionals how to influence community planning so that residents can be physically active and access healthy food.

According to Solomon, “This is a chance to connect people working on transportation, land use, community development and health so we can learn what works, and strengthen critical alliances.”

A dozen conference sessions are devoted to health-related topics. They cover everything from how to design and build environments that support physical activity and access to healthy food, to case studies of health professions and planners working together. The National Conference of State Legislatures and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are organizing a session on “Implementing Model Practices to Promote a Healthy Built Environment.” They will review and analyze various approaches states, cities and counties have undertaken to promote healthy communities and how they might be applicable in different parts of the country. Model practices range from tax policies that support a healthy built environment to strategies that improve community access to locally grown healthy foods.

The conference also offers a mix of light rail, bus, biking and walking tours showcasing community revitalization projects, transit-oriented developments, cutting-edge urban infill and green buildings – ranging from a “Taste of Taos” walking tour of the historic district and its food, art and architecture to a bike tour of infill projects to sustainable housing and transit-oriented development in downtown Albuquerque.

About the conference: The New Partners for Smart Growth conference will be held January 22-24 at the Albuquerque Convention Center. The event, hosted 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 11 tours of local model projects.

Featured among the conference's speakers are more than three dozen local elected officials (including state Representative Elias Barela, Santa Fe Mayor David Cross and Albuquerque Mayor Martin Chavez), educators, business leaders, health experts and transportation and land use planners from New Mexico.

Conference sponsors include the Local Government Commission and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Health-related cosponsors also include the American Heart Association, the American Public Health Association, the National Association of County and City Health Officials, the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, Leadership for Healthy Communities, St. Joseph Community Health, the Children’s Environmental Health Network, the National Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity, the Public Health Institute, the Society for Public Health Education and Kaiser Permanente.

For more details about the agenda, speakers, sponsors and tours: www.newpartners.org

The Local Government Commission is a 29-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.

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