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Planning — February 2010

## Healthy Planning in Action

Places that are forging together the two disciplines of public health and planning.

*By Heather Wooten*

In North Fair Oaks, California, a small unincorporated community in San Mateo County, near the San Francisco Bay, a planning process that aims to maximize transit and infill development to improve health and quality of life is just beginning.

In many ways, North Fair Oaks (pop. 15,000) is similar to communities across the country: It is a built out suburban area within a larger urban region that needs to retool in the face of a changing population and shifting resident needs. A diverse, working class community, North Fair Oaks struggles to provide affordable housing and access to daily goods and services, especially given the Bay Area's high cost of living.

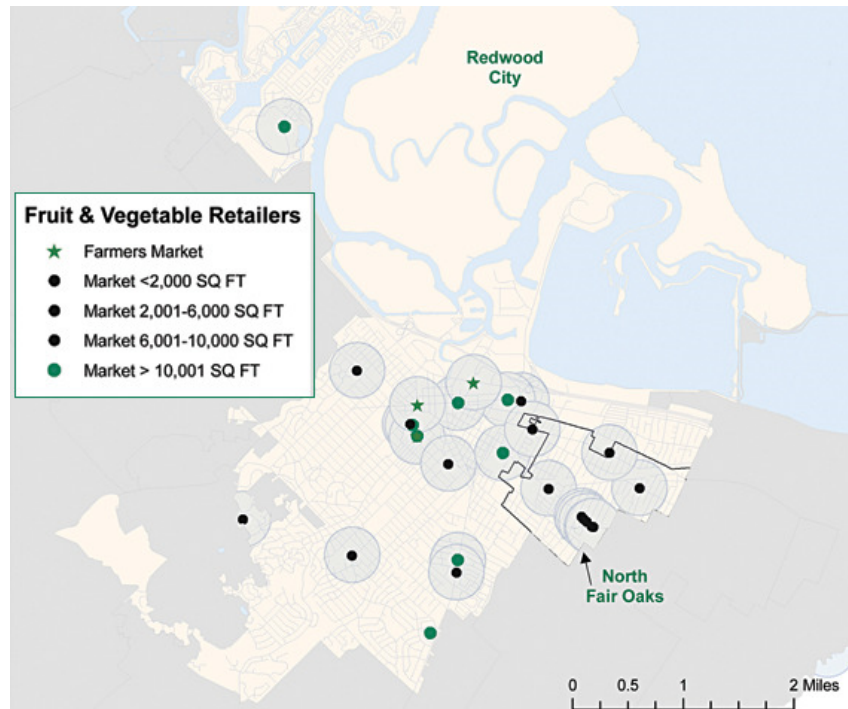
As planners address these challenges, they are also thinking seriously about how the North Fair Oaks specific plan, which is currently in the works, can improve the community's health.

San Mateo County is not alone in its efforts to yoke planning and health together. Over the last few years, a growing body of research and a small but vocal core of public health advocates and experts have argued that public health should be expressly addressed through planning and the community design processes. In California alone, the last two years have seen more than double the number of general plans that include health-related policies (from about 14 in 2008 to more than 30 today).

Now places as diverse as San Francisco and South Gate (in Los Angeles County) have taken up the challenge. Richmond, Riverside County, and Delano also are including separate health elements in their general plans, while Shasta County public health staffers are participating in development review.

The big question in San Mateo and elsewhere is, How do we do it? What are the practices, strategies, and programs that actually support this work?

First of all, this effort requires a deep commitment to new partnerships between public agencies and the communities they serve. It also means rethinking each stage of the planning process, from the initial concept to project implementation. The North Fair Oaks approach offers a set of strategies to begin routine integration of health considerations into planning practice.



**Share information and build partnerships**

In San Mateo County, early efforts by the health department to work on issues involving the built environment were focused on raising awareness among various agencies (including city and county planning agencies, the parks and recreation departments, housing agencies, and regional transportation planning agencies) about the impact that each had on residents' health. "We used to go and talk about immunizations or H1N1 — but we started talking about land use and health, or the connection between food access and health," says SaraT Mayer, the director of health policy and planning for San Mateo County Health System.

In looking for other opportunities to further their impact, the health department identified planning processes that were beginning or under way and began to attend planning and

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community engagement meetings.

The first project, begun in 2006, was the Grand Boulevard Initiative for El Camino Real, the corridor that links cities throughout San Mateo County. Department staff came to discussions armed with public health data and priorities that had not been considered in previous transportation projects: mapping all food outlets along El Camino Real and addressing pedestrian and bicycle access from a physical activity perspective (as opposed to focusing only on the environmental benefits of getting people out of cars). The health department also passed along information heard from residents, namely that the road divided the community and that heavy traffic affected the mental health of nearby residents.

The health department wasn't always sure what its role would be. "It is a learning process that we're in the midst of," Mayer says. "We realized that what we needed was to build staff capacity," to help health professionals and planners understand each other and their jobs, she says. "We needed to be more sophisticated about data analysis and mapping. Planners don't always relate to traditional public health data analysis, like age pyramids. And the health department didn't even know at what stage in the process to participate."

Now, the health department is focused on plugging into policy development as a way to maximize resources and impact. "We need to be able to engage in the conversation and contribute something to it, but not create parallel processes," Mayer says.

An interdepartmental working group grew out of that first corridor project and continues to collaborate today. The working group, which includes the county's parks, planning, public works, and housing departments, as well as SamTrans — San Mateo County's regional transportation district — meets every other month to identify opportunities to work together. The North Fair Oaks specific plan is one of three similar plans in the works throughout the county, where health-promoting policies are a central component of planning.

Often one of the biggest challenges to working together is budgetary. A handful of communities around the country, including Hennepin County, Minnesota; Alexandria, Virginia; and Shasta County, California, add planners to health department staffs or public health professionals to planning. But most partnership efforts carve out of "extra" staff time in both departments, making them vulnerable to cuts when new funding or work priorities pop up. Sharing the funding for interagency staff positions can be an important step in institutionalizing partnerships.

On the flip side of the budgetary coin, an advantage to an interdisciplinary approach is access to additional funding opportunities. In San Mateo County, the interagency working group successfully applied for a planning grant from the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, which allocates federal funding for transit-oriented, infill, and mixed use planning and development.

#### Assess conditions that impact public health



Using health data and analyses, public health staff can help identify a community's most critical health concerns and work with planners to address them through planning policies. San Mateo County's Community Health Profiles provide key health indicators at the city level, including leading causes of death, average life expectancy, childhood obesity by school district, healthy food availability, and park access maps. This easy-to-digest snapshot approach lets planners, elected officials, and other non-health experts understand and identify important health issues that can be affected by planning and development decisions.

In San Mateo County, addressing the needs of an aging population is a major issue for both planners and public health practitioners. To help focus strategies for transportation, housing, and other needs, the health system has developed a demographic projection model called Aging 2020–2030. The county's population over the age of 85 is projected to grow by 148 percent by 2030, and surveys have found important preference differences in housing and transportation choices between today's and tomorrow's seniors.

One of the biggest areas of difference was respondents' reported use of transit now versus their desire to use transit in the future. Many aging San Mateo residents expressed interest, even an expectation, that they would have accessible, high-quality transit service to rely on when they could not drive themselves. This contrasts starkly with the lack of existing transit services in many of the communities surveyed.

Seniors also expressed a strong interest in being able to walk to meet their daily needs, with safe and convenient access to restaurants, services, and entertainment. In many ways, this represents a new retirement model, Mayer says. Armed with this information, planners are realizing that the autocentric patterns that dominate San Mateo County will not serve their community in the next 20 years. The North Fair Oaks plan's focus on transit-oriented development and infill is a reflection of the fact it is much more cost-effective to create higher density, compact development along corridors than it is to operate senior buses and other mobility programs.

Two other tools for measuring the effect of the built environment on health are health impact assessments (which look at a range of health indicators and the potential impact of a policy or project) and community food assessments (which examine the availability of groceries, farmers markets, urban agriculture, and other healthy food resources).

In doing these assessments, planners and health practitioners found they have complementary skills. Training and fluency in mapping and geographic analysis are critical for taking stock of existing conditions (such as a lack of pedestrian connectivity or full-service grocery stores) and identifying underserved communities. Analyzing local health data (such as asthma hospitalization rates for children living near freeways) can spur new planning policies that will help protect communities and reduce negative health impacts.

The health department introduced planners to an index called the "social gradient," which shows that people with higher wealth and income are more likely to live longer than people with less wealth. The social gradient pattern applies to neighborhoods as well as to individuals. The index shows that North Fair Oaks has the lowest life expectancy in the county. That fact has been a motivating factor in getting the county to focus resources and investment in this community.

Health impact assessments are now being used in planning processes in many places around the U.S., including a rezoning of the Eastern Neighborhoods of San Francisco, the general plan for Humboldt County, California, a bridge expansion in the Seattle area, and the Atlanta Beltline

project (a plan to bring transit, trails, parks, and redevelopment to a 22-mile loop of largely abandoned freight rail line circling the city center).

#### Take public health into account

Public health staff can play an important role in every stage of plan development, especially in reaching out to the community and in drafting plan language. Even before the North Fair Oaks planning process began, San Mateo County public health staff shared sample health-supportive land-use policies with local planners and decision makers. They also helped develop the project scope, ensuring that the plan would address issues such as park access; access to healthy food options; public transit, walking, and bicycling; public spaces for events (like farmers markets); and access to affordable housing, economic opportunity, and living wage jobs that align with residents' skills and training.

When it came time to pick a consultant to lead the planning effort, Mayer represented the health system on the interviewing team — a first. The entire process was eye-opening, Mayer says, noting that she was struck by the level of detail and the amount of research consultants provided even at the proposal stage. She, in turn, made sure that the consultants understood the public health issues the plan would address.

As the North Fair Oaks plan moves into the plan-making phase (so far, the county has identified the consultants who will carry out the work), the health system will continue to provide guidance and input in two key areas: technical expertise and outreach and engagement. Mayer notes that the health department's role and relationships in the community can make for a more comprehensive process.

"Planning is not just regulation," says Steve Monowitz, a long-range planner with the San Mateo County Planning and Building Department. "When the community understands the connection between land-use decisions and their health and their children's health, they'll see those links and want to play a role in helping the county develop better plans."

#### Implement healthy planning goals

Of course, getting health-promoting policies into plans is a critical step, but it doesn't mean that what gets built actually reflects those policies. It's vital to ensure that implementation strategies — zoning, subdivision regulations, and design guidelines — translate a broad policy mandate ("promote neighborhood walkability") into specific standards, regulations, and incentives.

Communities such as Los Angeles, Cleveland, and Minneapolis are pioneering a variety of new uses for traditional planning tools, including using conditional use permits for fast food or drive-through restaurants, defining and allowing community gardens as of right in designated zones, and requiring pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure in new developments.

Some public health agencies such as San Francisco's and Denver's tri-county health department are also creating and using "healthy development" checklists that provide users with a framework for evaluating projects from a public health perspective. They look at issues such as street design, wastewater management, and air quality, among others.

San Mateo County has developed a Healthy Housing checklist that evaluates access to food, public safety, housing density, and transportation and transit. It recognizes the different development patterns across the county, and includes criteria tailored to rural, suburban, and urban neighborhoods. For example, access to healthy food, the checklist asks, "For residential uses, is the project within \_\_\_ mile of a supermarket?" Standards call for a half mile in urban communities, one mile for small cities, and two miles in rural areas.

Although the North Fair Oaks plan is not yet in place, the process of moving from policy to implementation may be more efficient and effective with a healthy planning approach. The benefits to planners are obvious to Monowitz, who urges planners and public health staff to take advantage of the opportunity to work together.

"Health departments are staffed with people who can be a great resource to the planning department," he says. "We can only solve these public health problems if we collaborate. And local governments can't do this all on their own. The more we work together and with our community members on plan development and implementation, the more successful we'll be."

*Heather Wooten is a senior planning and policy associate with Planning for Healthy Places at Public Health Law & Policy based in Oakland, California. She also is a coauthor of a PHLP toolkit called How to Create and Implement Healthy General Plans.*

Web Only Sidebar: How Can Planning Departments Support Healthy Communities?

#### Resources

**Images:** Top — An ongoing analysis of food retailers in San Mateo County, California, shows wide disparities in residents' access to healthy foods. Map San Mateo County Health System Health Policy and Planning 10/2009. Bottom — Convenience stores and fast food outlets are prominent in the North Fair Oaks area of unincorporated San Mateo County. Photo Angela Sajuthi-Leach, San Mateo County Health System.

**On the web:** Planning and Community Health Research Center:  
[www.planning.org/nationalcenters/health](http://www.planning.org/nationalcenters/health)

Centers for Disease Control, "Recommended Community Strategies and Measurements to Prevent Obesity in the United States": [www.cdc.gov/obesity/downloads/community\\_strategies\\_guide.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/downloads/community_strategies_guide.pdf)

Leadership for Healthy Communities, "Action Strategies Toolkit":  
[www.leadershipforhealthycommunities.org/content/view/full/352/154](http://www.leadershipforhealthycommunities.org/content/view/full/352/154)

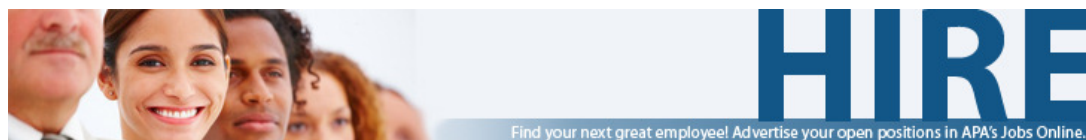
San Francisco Department of Public Health's "Healthy Development Measurement Tool":  
<http://thehdmt.org>

The National Association of City and County Health Officials' "Public Health in Land Use Planning and Community Design" checklist: [www.naccho.org/topics/environmental/landuseplanning/toolbox.cfm](http://www.naccho.org/topics/environmental/landuseplanning/toolbox.cfm)

Health policy and planning in San Mateo County: [www.smhealth.org/hpp](http://www.smhealth.org/hpp)

Planning for Healthy Places, a project of Public Health Law & Policy: [www.healthyplanning.org](http://www.healthyplanning.org)

Partnership funding opportunity: CDC's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, "Communities Putting Prevention to Work": [www.cdc.gov/nccdrp/recovery](http://www.cdc.gov/nccdrp/recovery)



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