



Utilizing City Land Use Strategies and City Policies to Address Threats to Public Health

E. Richard Brown, Director, UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, and Professor, UCLA School of Public Health

The health of residents of the City of Los Angeles must be of paramount concern. Obesity has been shown to be a major contributing factor in several diseases, such as diabetes and heart disease. The rate of obesity is particularly alarming among low income residents of Los Angeles. Reducing or preventing obesity will improve the quality of life of adults and children. Straightforward methods have been found to be effective in reducing obesity, including:

- ★ Increasing physical activity
- ★ Increasing access to and encouraging consumption of healthy foods
- ★ Decreasing consumption of unhealthy foods
- ★ These methods depend on more than just the efforts of an individual. Dramatic changes to the environment are essential to their success. Los Angeles can adopt strategies that will facilitate these methods by using its zoning codes. The primary purpose of zoning laws is the protection of public health; zoning may therefore be an effective tool for addressing obesity as a public health threat.
- ★ Because fast food has been identified as a major factor in obesity, efforts should be made to limit the number of fast food outlets, particularly in areas that already are saturated with them. Several other cities have used zoning to restrict fast food, including:
 - ★ Banning fast food and drive ins – Concord, Mass; Carlsbad, CA; Newport, RI
 - ★ Prohibiting fast food restaurants in certain areas – San Francisco, CA ; Davis, CA;
 - ★ Limiting the number of fast food restaurants – Berkeley, CA
- ★ Regulating density by limiting proximity or distance – Westwood area of Los Angeles; Bainbridge, Wash; Warner, NH
- ★ Regulating proximity of fast food to other uses – Detroit, Mich; Arden Hills, Minn
- ★ Contrasted with the proliferation of fast food outlets is the shortage of grocery stores and supermarkets offering fresh fruit, vegetables and meats that are of good quality at reasonable prices. This is a serious problem in low income areas of Los Angeles, where access to healthy food options are severely limited. To increase the number of grocery stores in these areas, the city could identify vacant or surplus land that could be developed for grocery stores. City resources could also be earmarked to fund incentive programs and provide technical assistance for small businesses, encouraging small corner stores or liquor stores to convert to grocery stores.
- ★ Zoning and other land use tools can also be used to achieve healthier communities, and encourage healthy activities that could reduce obesity, such as walking from home to work or to shop. In addition to impacting obesity these strategies are likely to yield additional health benefits by decreasing the use of cars, resulting in less traffic and less pollution. These land use tools include:
 - ★ Transit Oriented Development (TOD) – Land use planning that encourages housing and retail development near transit stops to increase walking and the use of public transportation.
 - ★ “Joint Use” of public facilities, such as schools and parks, to increase access to physical activity resources.

- ★ Health Impact Assessments (HIA) – a process that requires city agencies to determine the positive or negative effects land use policies or development projects would have on the health of a particular community prior to approval. HIA should be considered early in the design and decision-making phases of a project in order to promote healthy lifestyles and facilitate healthy choices, such as good nutrition and increased physical activity. HIA could be used to encourage open space (which promotes physical activity) and healthy eating (grocery stores) and to limit or discourage unhealthy food outlets (fast food outlets). HIA's could also be used to limit advertising, such as billboards for unhealthy food choices.
- ★ Recreation Element – could be added as a part of the General Plan framework to ensure that land use strategies that promote health are prioritized; these features could include recreation areas, parks, bike paths, jogging trails, open space.

- ★ Recreation Requirements – L.A. Community Redevelopment Agency could incorporate a recreation space requirement to each redevelopment project (in the same manner that a public art component is required).

As a public institution, the city should model good practices to demonstrate how everyone has a role in the reduction of obesity. The city can ensure that its employees, contractors, vendors and subcontractors increase healthy eating and physical activity by requiring that healthy food be served at city venues, and that time and opportunity for recreation is incorporated into city contracts. Moreover, the city can limit or ban unhealthy foods and drinks in vending machines on city property and sites receiving city funds.

Finally, the Mayor can become an outspoken advocate - using his "bully pulpit" to promote healthy eating and physical activity. Not only would individual residents of the city benefit from efforts to reduce obesity, but the entire city's economic health and vitality improve dramatically when opportunities for recreation and healthy eating improve.