

Applying Smart Growth Principles to General Plan Update, Kings County Moves Toward a Healthier Future

When it comes to high-impact community collaboration, timing can make all the difference.

“In 2005, our community development agency was just starting on our first general update in 14 years,” says Greg Gatzka, Kings County Community Development Agency Director, “and the timing coincided with the public health department’s efforts to address community health issues relating to the built environment.”

More than 60 percent of the population in Kings County is estimated to be overweight or obese. “We know that these high rates are fueled by environments that don’t support access to healthy, affordable foods and physical activity opportunities,” says Juan Ibarra, community health capacity-building specialist with the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP). “The public health department saw a real opportunity to work with planners to take a non-traditional prevention approach based on smart growth principles, and so we began sharing ideas.”

Beginning with those very first conversations initiated in 2005, public health staff were pleasantly surprised by the receptivity of planning staff, and their partnership was cemented.

Smart growth is aimed at averting the problems faced by many rapidly growing communities, by promoting walkability, bikeability, and public transit; neighborhood schools and mixed-use development; and the preservation of natural and cultural resources. To build momentum for Smart Growth in Kings County, the Kings County Department of Public Health applied for a Local Public Health and the Built Environment (LPHBE) grant from the California Department of Public Health and the California Center for Physical Activity. With the “mini grant” that came through, Gatzka and an assistant planner were able to attend a national smart growth conference in Los Angeles.

“That conference was eye opening,” says Gatzka, a native Californian who felt a personal connection to many of the health-related issues discussed, including the fact that he had suffered asthma as a child. “It reminded me of the public health origins from which the land-use planning profession derived,” Gatzka explains. “Early planners were concerned with moving unhealthy uses away from where people lived. Over time, though, planning became ‘how do we divide up land and issue zoning permits’ instead of ‘how do we build healthy communities.’ For me, this initiative returned us to planning’s roots.”



Improving pedestrian safety is an important goal of the Kings County general plan update.

As soon as he returned from the conference, Gatzka began working with the public health department on a mutual education process. A series of four lunchtime roundtables ensued around health, the built environment, and smart growth codes and implementation.

“Attendance at the luncheons was remarkable,” says CCROPP’s Ibarra, “Everyone recognized that we all have a stake in community health.” Up to 25 people attended each meeting, including health department personnel and city and county planning staff, real estate agents and developers, community residents, elected officials, and other agency staff. The planning meetings proved so fruitful that attendees have continued to meet on a monthly basis.

“The cross-pollination between planners and public health people, who normally don’t work closely together, has shaped our ability to contribute and comment

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on general plans,” noted Keith Winkler, director of Kings County Department of Public Health.

As they worked together on the general plan update, the group put most of its up-front efforts on the county’s unincorporated communities: Kettleman City, Armona, Stratford, and Home Garden. Kings County’s last general update, in 1993, “was more general and did not thoroughly address the smaller communities,” Gatzka explains. “This update essentially made mini general plans for each of the four communities, addressing their particular challenges, resources, and opportunities, with a particular focus on health issues.”

Community residents played an integral role in the process. “Whenever the community is involved, officials tend to listen more,” says Ibarra. “We invited people to sit down with us, and define what they wanted their community to look like. Planners were made aware of community health related issues, and began seizing the opportunity to help increase the food and physical activity environment.”

The planning team strategically modified the “Safety Element” of the general plan, which typically deals with natural hazards such as earthquakes, floods, and landslides, renaming it the “Health and Safety Element” and expanding its scope to include the built environment. “We developed this element in house,” says Gatzka, “rather than contract out the planning process like many communities do with general updates. We

wanted to work directly with the people who would be impacted.”

Even before the new general plan was officially adopted, the collaborative visioning process facilitated a number of positive changes. Gatzka points to two important examples: “In general plan discussions, residents of Kettleman City identified pedestrian crossing along Highway 41—a crossing children use to get to and from school—of critical safety concern; and a lack of fresh produce availability as another problem impacting community health. Through collaborative efforts, the county received a \$140,000 Cal Trans Environmental Justice Grant to study safety enhancements along Highway 41. And with CCROPP’s help, the first farmers market was established in Kettleman City.”

Gatzka is part of a new generation of planners advocating smart growth principles to make development and health mutually beneficial goals. For

their efforts, Gatzka and his colleagues in the partnership known as the Kings County Community Development Agency (KCCDA) earned an honorable 2008 Merit Award from the Cities Counties Schools Partnership (CCS)—one of only three merit awards given to California cities that year; he also received a 2008 CCROPP Cultivator Award. The partnership was also recognized by the 2009 San Joaquin Valley Blueprint Awards Program.

The Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP) is the Central California Public Health Partnership’s initiative to create environments that support healthy eating and active living in the San Joaquin Valley. The regional obesity prevention program is administered by the Central California Center for Health and Human Services and is housed under the College of Health and Human Services at California State University, Fresno. CCROPP is funded by The California Endowment.

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Local Public Health and the Built Environment (LPHBE) Network, a project of the California Department of Public Health and the California Center for Physical Activity, www.caphysicalactivity.org/lphbe.html