



Chapter 10: Healthy Communities Element

Introduction

HEALTHY COMMUNITIES CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The General Plan Vision speaks of the importance of promoting a healthy living environment for all residents. The Healthy Communities Element provides a framework for translating the General Plan vision for a healthy Riverside County into reality by identifying policies to achieve that vision. The Healthy Communities Element addresses areas where public health and planning intersect, including transportation and active living, access to nutritious foods, access to health care, mental health, quality of life, and environmental health.

BACKGROUND

Riverside County is geographically the fourth largest county in California, stretching nearly 200 miles across and covering 7,200 square miles. The population is currently estimated at 2.1 million, after increasing 44% in the last decade. Riverside County has frequently been ranked as the fastest growing county in the state. If current projections hold true, the County population will reach 4.7 million by 2050, making it the second most populous county in the state. Much of this growth has occurred in unincorporated areas as commuters and retirees from neighboring counties have come in search of affordable housing.

While infectious diseases often receive much publicity, the real and continually growing threat to our community's health is due to chronic disease. The diseases and health conditions that currently reduce the productivity and quality of life of Riverside County residents are intricately entwined with daily routines. Daily routines are shaped by the circumstances our residents encounter in their homes and by the neighborhoods and streets that surround and connect our residents to their jobs, retail outlets, and each other. The risks from being physically inactive, eating poorly, breathing bad air, and having stress and depression does not immediately result in poor health. However, data shows that the presence of these risks over a number of years is associated with the leading causes of death and illness in our community.

For example, when obesity levels rise, so too will the number of Riverside County residents who die from the current leading causes of death: 1) heart



disease, 2) cancer, and 3) stroke. The death rates for all of these conditions were higher in Riverside County than in California, as were death rates for lung disease (COPD) and unintentional injury. With heart disease strongly linked to lifestyle and individual behavior, it is of particular concern that Riverside County ranks 53rd for heart disease mortality among its population out of the 58 counties in California. Other illnesses like diabetes, asthma, and lung disease are also related to the direct and indirect effects of built environments that discourage physical activity, promote unhealthy eating habits, and increase exposure to environmental toxins in the air, water, and soil.

HEALTH INDICATORS

In order to show the need for policies that will shape community design and the health of future generations, it is important to document the current health of residents in a measurable manner so that as changes are adopted and the environment changes, progress toward achieving health goals can be monitored at the population level. A compilation of health, social, and environmental indicators is provided in the technical document identified as Appendix M. The indicators are grouped into meaningful topic areas and are meant to provide support and justification for the policies of this Healthy Communities Element.

INITIAL EFFORTS TO IMPROVE HEALTH OUTCOMES

As noted, Riverside County is one of the fastest growing counties in the nation, and has high rates of physical inactivity and chronic disease, including cardiovascular disease, obesity and diabetes. (Figure HC-1). The rapid growth has also resulted in concerns about urban sprawl and poor air quality, both of which have health impacts. To address these health concerns, the Riverside County Department of Public Health incorporated “creating more livable communities” as a goal in the department’s Strategic Plan. To accomplish this goal a multi-disciplinary public health team was formed and works closely with what were formerly considered non-traditional partners including the Departments of Planning, Transportation, Economic Development and Fire, the Open Space and Park District, government associations, city officials and developers in integrating health and safety factors into mainstream planning efforts. Riverside County has been recognized nationally for efforts to integrate health into land use and transportation planning.

Over the past several years many programs have been implemented to improve access to healthy foods and increase opportunities for physical activity that improve health outcomes. Pedestrian and bicycle plans have been developed in cities to improve safety and increase walking and biking. The Department of Public Health has sponsored a variety of trainings and walkable community workshops countywide. Public health data has been provided to cities and various county departments on a variety of topics including obesity, physical activity levels, access to healthy foods, park inequities, crash data, and pedestrian injuries. This data has made a compelling case for improvements in the built environment that affect health. The Public Health Department has worked closely with County agencies on a number of efforts including: reviewing design guidelines for new developments, participating on the trails committee to review development applications, serving on task forces and steering committees, preparing joint grant applications, creating a trails map for



the Coachella Valley and providing technical assistance to cities to secure Safe Routes To School funding to increase the safety and walkability around schools.

The policies in this element will be instrumental in furthering these initial efforts.

Policies

The policies in the Healthy Communities Element are intended to address Riverside County’s key health issues and challenges with the goal of fostering the overall health and well being of County residents. In addition, particular attention is paid to those residents who are considered especially vulnerable to public health risks, including children, the elderly, the disabled, and those in poverty.

The policies in this element address a wide range of issues that affect public health including:

- Overall health
- Land use and community design
- Healthy transportation system
- Arts and culture
- Social capital
- Parks, trails and open space
- Access to healthy foods and nutrition
- Healthcare and mental health care
- Schools, recreational centers and childcare
- Environmental health

Because health is such a comprehensive issue, the policies in this element may at times overlap with the policies in other General Plan Elements. When such overlap occurs the policies included herein are intended to work in concert with and compliment the policies in the other elements.

In each of the following sections, the policies are grouped by topic and subtopic and are preceded by a brief discussion of the issues pertaining to the topic.

OVERALL HEALTH

The County endeavors to promote a built environment that supports healthy choices and, when feasible, prevents the conditions that cause chronic health problems. The following policies outline the overarching principals of planning for Healthy Communities. These policies are intended to address the multidisciplinary nature of health issues and recognize that the efforts of many different County departments and agencies affect health outcomes. These policies also anticipate the need to understand the nature and extent of health issues and to track trends over time in order to maintain effective policies and programs to promote public health.



Policies:

HC 1.1 Foster the overall health and well-being of County residents, particularly the most vulnerable populations.

HC 1.2 Promote an understanding of the connections between the built environment and the on-going health challenges in Riverside County.

LAND USE AND COMMUNITY DESIGN

Land use patterns – how the land uses are arranged and the urban form is constructed – are critical to the health and well being of residents because they affect such things as levels of physical activity, access to nutritious food, and the creation and exposure to pollutants. Healthy land use patterns can be achieved by encouraging infill, focusing development in mixed use districts and along major transit corridors, avoiding leap frog development, constructing a diverse mix of uses throughout the County and encouraging land use patterns that promote walking, bicycling and transit use.

Riverside County is very diverse; it has many urban communities which range widely in terms of densities, uses and scale. There are also many agricultural communities and rural settlements as well as large areas of open space that include significant natural and agricultural resources. The County has grown rapidly in recent decades, thus there are many new communities being built that present an important opportunity to create new, healthier development patterns.

The goal of this section is to encourage land use patterns that promote increased physical activity and healthy lifestyles in all of the communities in Riverside County. Many of the land use and community design policies relevant to health are addressed in other elements of the General Plan, most particularly the Land Use Element. Therefore, only additional policies, specifically related to health are included here.

Countywide Land Uses

These policies are relevant to many land uses in the County and shall be integrated into Riverside County communities to the maximum extent feasible.

Policies:

HC 2.1 Encourage a built environment that promotes physical activity and access to healthy foods while reducing driving and pollution by:

- a. Promoting the use of survey tools such as Health Impact Assessments, Development Application Health Checklist, or other tools the County deems effective to evaluate the impacts of development on public health.
- b. Directing new growth to existing, urbanized areas while reducing new growth in undeveloped areas of the County.

HC 2.2 Promote increased physical activity, reduced driving and increased walking, cycling and public transit by:



- a. Requiring where appropriate the development of compact, development patterns that are pedestrian and bicycle friendly.
- b. Increasing opportunities for active transportation (walking and biking) and transit use.
- c. Encouraging the development of neighborhood grocery stores that provide fresh produce.

Community Development Land Uses

Community Development Areas are described in the Land Use Element as “the appropriate location for urban and suburban development” and are intended to include: “a breadth of land uses that foster variety and choice, accommodate a range of life styles, living and working conditions, and accommodate diverse community settings.” They are also intended to provide a quality physical environment achieved through a range of community design options that respond to varied lifestyle choices with a high regard for the environment, community character and safety. These areas are intended to have a balance of jobs, housing, and services within each community to help achieve mobility, open space, and air quality goals described in the General Plan vision. Many of these same characteristics are important for creating healthy environments for living and working. Integrating land use strategies that foster improvements to the quality of the physical environment and achieve a higher level of community balance will allow County residents to thrive.

Policies:

- HC 3.1 Where appropriate, require high-density, mixed use development near existing and proposed high use transit centers.
- HC 3.2 Where appropriate, design communities with a balanced mix of uses that provide regional transportation facilities within walking distance.
- HC 3.3 Where appropriate, require pedestrian-oriented design that encourages the use of bicycles and walking as alternatives to driving and increases levels of physical activity.
- HC 3.4 Provide for a range of housing options to accommodate a range of income levels and household types.

Open Space, Rural, Rural Community and Agriculture Land Uses

These policies are intended for Open Space, Rural, Rural Community, and Agriculture areas, which were designated in this General Plan to preserve the rural lifestyle that is an integral part of the character and appeal of Riverside County. Agriculture defines the unique character of many communities in Riverside County, and helps to define the edges of and provide separation between developed areas. Widespread and diverse agricultural lands are one of Riverside County's most important land uses in terms of historic character, economic strength and human health. When local agricultural products are



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grown and distributed locally, people have better access to high quality, nutritious food. In addition, local food sources are closer to local retailers and thus require less in terms of transportation costs and fossil fuel. The goal of this section is to promote development patterns in Rural and Agricultural areas that are consistent with the General Plan Vision and which promote healthy lifestyles.

Policies:

HC 4.1 Promote healthy land use patterns by doing each of the following to the extent feasible:

- a. Preserving rural open space areas, and scenic resources.
- b. Preventing inappropriate development in areas that are environmentally sensitive or subject to severe natural hazards.
- c. Developing incentives, such as transfer of development rights, clustered development, development easements, and other mechanisms, to preserve the economic value of agricultural and open space lands.

HC 4.2 Promote services that enable residents to meet their daily needs without driving. Such services may include: shopping shuttles to nearby retail districts, retail near residential, and mobile or virtual health clinics.

TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM

The County strives to create a multimodal transportation system that supports active living and healthy lifestyles. The transportation system should facilitate walking, cycling and public transit use while also minimizing the need to drive long distances to meet basic daily needs or get to work. The transportation system should be designed in close coordination with land use patterns and the urban form so that all transportation facilities encourage people to drive less, walk more, and have greater access to jobs, healthy food, and community resources.

Healthier transportation networks can be achieved by creating high quality transit service with safe, attractive facilities for all users, including drivers, pedestrians and bicyclists. Such attributes encourage public use.

Non-Motorized Transportation System

The goal of these policies is to improve the overall safety of the transportation system for pedestrians and cyclists as well as improving access for and visibility of all non-motorized roadway users.



Policies:

- HC 5.1 Identify non-motorized traffic safety issues and locations with a high degree of traffic incidents.
- HC 5.2 Pursue funding for projects that reduce the risk of non-motorized/motorized vehicle collisions, particularly in areas where such collisions frequently occur.
- HC 5.3 When feasible, incorporate non-motorized safety features within road improvement projects.
- HC 5.4 Consider pedestrian safety and crime prevention measures in major transit centers and high pedestrian traffic generators such as schools, community centers, etc.
- HC 5.5 When building sidewalks, ensure that they are sufficiently wide and clear of obstructions to facilitate pedestrian movement and access for the disabled.
- HC 5.6 Implement traffic-calming and traffic-slowing measures on roads with a high level of pedestrian and non-motorized vehicle activity.

Multi-Modal Transportation Network

Many areas of the County experience severe traffic congestion. A large portion of county residents experience long commute times, and the hours and miles spent driving continue to rise. Increased driving rates are a source of physical, economic, and environmental stress. Driving has been linked with negative health impacts, including higher rates of traffic crashes and increased levels of stress and anxiety. In addition, more vehicle miles and vehicle hours spent traveling by motor vehicle translate into greater amounts of air pollution, which in turn has health impacts.

Driving is likely for some time to remain the main form of transportation in Riverside County, particularly in rural areas. However, the County is striving to create a balanced, multi-modal transportation system, which gives people choices about how to get to their destinations and, at the same time, increases their physical activity and reduces pollution. To do this, the following policies endeavor to improve access to and the effectiveness of alternative transportation modes, such as trains, buses, bicycles, and walking, for all parts of the County.

Policies:

- HC 6.1 Coordinate with transportation service providers and transportation planning entities to improve access to multi-modal transportation options throughout the County, including public transit.
- HC 6.2 Coordinate with transportation service providers and transportation planning entities to address the location of civic uses such as schools and government buildings, commercial corridors, and medical facilities so that they are accessible by public transit.



HC 6.3 Coordinate with transportation service providers and transportation planning entities to ensure that public transportation facilities are located a convenient distance from residential areas.

HC 6.4 Ensure that regional trail plans are implemented at the Area Plan and Specific Plan level.

HC 6.5 Promote job growth within Riverside County to reduce the substantial out-of-county job commutes that exist today.

ARTS AND CULTURE

Arts and cultural activities are an essential part of a complete, healthy community. Arts and cultural activities contribute to the creation and sense of place, augment local economies, enhance the urban environment and engage citizens in productive dialogue about important issues. Thriving arts and cultural experiences contribute to emotional and social development and provide educational opportunities for residents. The following policies articulate the County's objective to foster arts and culture as an integral part of the healthy communities program.

Policies:

HC 7.1 Encourage the provision of public art and preserve and increase access to cultural resources.

HC 7.2 Encourage partnerships among entities and institutions including tribal governments which promote art and cultural programs, foster community identity, and enhance neighborhood pride.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Communities that have social capital are healthier and provide a higher quality of life for all residents. Social capital is an integrated system of family, community, and civic networks that is the underpinning and core fabric of social communities. Social capital has a stream of benefits including safety and security, friendship and community, a strong sense of civic identity, etc. Studies show that social connectedness improves cardio-vascular and mental health and results in faster recovery from illness. An important ingredient for the creation of social capital is the establishment of places for residents to meet, organize, learn, and socialize.

The policies contained in this section seek to elevate social capital for the purpose of building a strong platform upon which communities will thrive.

Policies:

HC 8.1 Promote development patterns and policies that:

- a. Reduce commute times.
- b. Encourage the improvement of vacant properties and the reinvestment in neighborhoods.



- c. Provide public space for people to congregate and interact socially.
- d. Foster safe and attractive environments.
- e. Encourage civic participation.

HC 8.2 Support cohesive neighborhoods, especially with life-cycle housing opportunities.

COMPLETE COMMUNITIES

Complete communities provide for the basic needs of individuals, including food, shelter and safety within a cohesive, attractive environment. In addition, basic services like childcare, dry cleaning, and regional public transportation facilities are available within easy walking distance, thus promoting physical activity, healthy nutrition and social interactions. In addition to these basic human needs, complete communities support a balance of uses that encourage job and neighborhood stability, encourage the creation of social capital and nurture mental and cultural health as well.

Safety is an important component of a complete community. Fear of violence is a leading cause of anxiety and is a major reason people choose not to walk, use recreational facilities, or allow their children to play outside. The physical features, layout and design of many aspects of communities influence crime prevention and other crime-related outcomes, such as neighborhood deterioration and residents' fear of crime. When neighborhoods are designed to provide "defensible space," "natural surveillance," and a "sense of order," research shows a decline in street crime and, as importantly, a decline in residents' fear of crime. The following policies draw upon the principles described above to improve public safety in Riverside County through the creation and support of defensible, orderly and well-cared for neighborhoods.

Policies:

HC 9.1 Coordinate the development of complete neighborhoods that provide for the basic needs of daily life and for the health, safety, and welfare of residents.

HC 9.2 Require appropriate infrastructure, public facilities, and services.

HC 9.3 Require safe and appealing recreational opportunities.

HC 9.4 Improve safety and the perception of safety by requiring adequate lighting, street visibility, and defensible space.

HC 9.5 Where appropriate, require neighborhood retail, service and public facilities within walking distance of residential areas.



PARKS, TRAILS AND OPEN SPACE

A multi-use open space network, including parks and trails, promotes recreation and physical activity. Physical activity reduces the risk of obesity and chronic diseases, such as heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, Alzheimer’s disease—all major health issues affecting Riverside County residents. Physical activity also increases mental health and psychological development. Studies show that people who live within a ¼ mile of a park are 25 percent more likely to meet the minimum weekly physical activity standards.

An additional indicator of how much people use recreational facilities is the perception of safety. Therefore, providing for safe, well-lighted environments within easy access of a wide range of people is also important to create a useful and accessible multi-use open space network.

Riverside County has many diverse open space resources ranging from national and regional open spaces to local and neighborhood parks. However, access to these resources differs throughout the County. The following policies articulate the County’s commitment to providing a sustainable multi-use open space network that is accessible, safe, and enjoyable for all residents.

Policies:

HC 10.1 Provide residents of all ages and income levels with convenient and safe opportunities for recreation and physical activities.

HC 10.2 Increase access to open space resources by:

- a. Supporting a diversity of passive and active open spaces throughout the County.
- b. Facilitating the location of additional transportation routes to existing recreational facilities.
- c. Locating parks in close proximity to homes and offices.
- d. Requiring that development of parks, trails, and open space facilities occur concurrently with other area development.

HC 10.3 Encourage the expansion of facilities and amenities in existing parks.

HC 10.4 Encourage the construction of new parks and open spaces.

HC 10.5 Incorporate design features in the multi-use open space network that reflects the sense of place and unique characteristics of the community.

HC 10.6 Address both actual and perceived safety concerns that create barriers to physical activity by requiring adequate lighting, street visibility, and defensible space.

HC 10.7 When planning communities, encourage the location of parks near other community facilities such as schools, senior centers, recreation centers, etc.



HC 10.8 Encourage joint-use agreements with school districts that allow school properties to be used during non-school hours.

HC 10.9 When feasible, coordinate with public entities to allow easements to be used as parks and trails.

ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOODS AND NUTRITION

A healthy, varied diet is a critical component to a healthy life. Poor diet is a primary risk factor in many of the major chronic health issues facing Riverside County. Nearly 2 out of 3 adults and 15 percent of youth are overweight or obese in the County. As of 2005, there were over 115,000 adults diagnosed with diabetes living in Riverside County, an increase of roughly 40,000 people since 2003. At the same time, 80% of teens, 50% of adults, and 50% of children do not eat the daily recommended five fruits and vegetables. Over 40,000 teens and children report eating fast food two or more times a day.

Residents in Riverside County often do not have access to local, affordable healthy food outlets. Convenience stores, fast food restaurants, and gas stations are more prevalent and accessible in large parts of the County. The average community has nearly twice as many fast food outlets and convenience stores as grocery stores and produce stands. Several communities have more than three times as many unhealthy food options as healthy options. A balanced retail food environment enables consumers to access healthy foods and make informed decisions about the meals that would be best for them.

In addition to the traditional food retail outlets, farm- and garden-scale urban agriculture has benefits for public health, including encouraging people to consume fresh products and involving city dwellers in healthy, active work and recreation. Urban agriculture also contributes to the creation of safe, healthy, and green environments in neighborhoods and the reuse of otherwise vacant or underutilized land.

The following policies articulate the County’s program for increasing access to healthy food choices.

Policies:

HC 11.1 Improve access to fresh fruits, vegetables, and other healthy food by encouraging a mix of food establishments that offer healthy food choices.

HC 11.2 Promote the production and distribution of locally grown food by reducing barriers to farmers markets, food cooperatives, neighborhood or community gardens, ethnobotanical gardens, etc.



HEALTHCARE AND MENTAL HEALTH CARE

Affordable and accessible healthcare and mental health care provide timely intervention to reduce the impact of illnesses. Preventive measures – such as screening for common health problems, dental care, and vaccinations – have been shown to reduce incidences and severity of illnesses. Stress and high blood pressure are associated with increased risk of several chronic illnesses including stroke, obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. Anxiety is also associated with increased risk of aggression, depression and substance abuse. Similarly, attributes of the built environment, including the amount of driving, access to green space and nature, and the condition of the built environment, can affect mental health by impacting levels of stress, anxiety and depression.

The following policies articulate the County’s program for increasing access to healthcare and mental health care. For additional policies see the Department of Public Health 2007-2011 Strategic Plan.

Policies:

- HC 12.1 Provide a wide range of healthcare and mental health facilities that are transit-accessible and pedestrian-friendly.
- HC 12.2 Encourage public transit agencies to locate routes near healthcare and mental health facilities.

SCHOOLS, RECREATIONAL CENTERS AND DAY CARE CENTERS

A community that is designed to serve the full lifecycle requires a range of facilities for all ages and vulnerable populations. Day care centers, senior centers, schools, and other recreational centers contribute to the overall well being of residents. These facilities function best when they are centrally located and evenly distributed. The following policies set a framework for encouraging such facilities and the related services they provide.

Policies:

- HC 13.1 Encourage development of recreational centers to serve all phases of life (e.g. children, families, and senior citizens).
- HC 13.2 Encourage the location of recreational centers in areas not subject to environmental hazards and in areas where they are easily accessible by public transportation.

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

People today are exposed to an unprecedented amount of harmful substances ranging from particulate matter and emissions from auto and industrial sources to toxic pesticides and ingredients found in every day household and pharmaceutical products. These harmful substances enter into our air and water



supplies and accumulate in our bodies causing a range of health effects such as increased respiratory illnesses, cancer and other chronic health problems. Consequently, decisions about the location and mix of land uses, transportation investments, design and building practices and building materials can all have an impact on the environment and human health.

Motor vehicles are the principal source of particulate matter and other pollutants that contribute to poor air quality and associated respiratory illnesses. In general, the more vehicle miles traveled in a region, the worse the air pollution. Factories, concentrated in heavily industrial areas, are equally problematic. Heavy industrial areas have the potential for toxic releases that cause negative health impacts.

Products that we use to maintain landscaping affect ground water and the environment. The widespread use of pesticides and herbicides to maintain parks, roadsides, and other public spaces may result in unhealthy levels of exposure to toxins over time for the people – particularly children – who use these public spaces. The misuse of pesticides can contribute to the contamination of rivers and streams.

The following policies strive to improve air quality and respiratory health, and reduce pesticide use.

Policies:

- HC 14.1 When feasible, avoid siting homes and other sensitive receptors near known or anticipated sources of air pollution.
- HC 14.2 When feasible, avoid locating new sources of air pollution near homes and other sensitive receptors.
- HC 14.3 When feasible incorporate design features into projects, including flood control and water quality basins, to minimize the harborage of vectors such as mosquitoes.