

# Zoning

## Talking Points



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*Zoning divides a community into districts, and determines what can and cannot be built on the land within those districts.*

### For more information and resources on the relationship between the built environment and public health:

Land Use and Health  
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PUBLIC HEALTH  
LAW PROGRAM

### Primary message:

*Zoning can promote land uses that allow and encourage individuals to make healthy choices – or it can do just the opposite.*

*Decisions made about the built environment have profound implications for human health. Zoning decisions can affect the rate of injuries and chronic disease, as well as the ability of seniors to age in place.*

### Health problems include:

**Obesity.** According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 30 percent of U.S. adults age 20 and older are obese, and approximately 65 percent of Americans weigh more than is healthful. Today, one in five children and one in three teens is overweight or at risk of becoming overweight.

**Heart Disease.** The leading cause of death for women and men in the United States is heart disease, according to the American Heart Association. In 2003, a total of 685,089 people died of heart disease, accounting for 28 percent of all U.S. deaths.

**Diabetes.** One of every ten health care dollars spent in the United States goes toward diabetes and its complications. Between 1994 and 2004, the prevalence of diabetes increased more than 50 percent.

**Asthma.** Asthma rates have increased dramatically: Between 1980 and 1994, asthma prevalence increased by 75 percent and the death rate from asthma increased 56 percent, according to the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute of the National Institutes of Health.

### All of these health problems are linked to environmental factors.

- Research conducted by UCLA has correlated the **walkability of a neighborhood** with increased walking by residents and found that the neighborhood environment – including the availability of parks – influences individual health behaviors. In California's San Joaquin and

San Bernadino counties (regions characterized by sprawl development), 34 percent of residents reported that they do not walk at least once for ten minutes in a week, while only 13 percent of San Franciscans (who reside in a dense, walkable environment) walk that little.

- **Fear of crime** also can be a significant impediment to walking: One survey found that 13 percent of respondents would walk more if crime were not such a problem in their neighborhood.
- **Diesel exhaust** doesn't just aggravate asthma, it may cause it, according to a study by researchers from the Natural Resources Defense Council and the University of California at San Francisco School of Medicine. Studies have linked proximity to freeways and other sources of diesel exhaust to higher asthma rates in children.



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- Research has shown that households located near **places to obtain fruits and vegetables** consume more of them. A recent study found that in Chicago's African American neighborhoods, the nearest grocery store was roughly twice as distant as the nearest fast food restaurant. The same study found that obesity rates increased as the distance to grocery stores increased.
- A pre-Katrina Tulane University study found that predominantly black neighborhoods in New Orleans (which were also low-income) had 160 percent more **fast food restaurants** per square mile than predominantly white neighborhoods.

### How does zoning contribute to these problems?

- Conventional zoning, which separates uses and supports the creation of residential subdivisions that feature “loops and lollipops” rather than grids, requires **people drive on virtually all trips** and can make it difficult or even dangerous for those who might choose to walk.

- Zoning ordinances may support unhealthy land uses. For example, fast food restaurants may be allowed “as of right” without **limitations on the number of outlets** in a particular area.
- Zoning may make it difficult or impossible to introduce uses that promote health. For example, zoning codes may **limit the size of commercial uses**, making it difficult to bring a grocery store to a neighborhood that otherwise lacks stores selling fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Zoning may support the development of multifamily housing near high-traffic roads, exposing high numbers of residents to **diesel exhaust**.

### How can decision makers promote healthier zoning?

State and local officials can create environments that improve the built environment by revising laws, ordinances, and practices to promote the following:

- **“Mixed-use” zones**, which integrate residential and commercial uses
- **The construction of sidewalks**
- **Traffic-calming measures**, such as roundabouts and speed humps
- Requirements that city planners, engineers, real estate developers, and landscape architects consider **pedestrian access** to services and amenities when designing new communities or modifying existing ones
- **Limits on fast food restaurants** (many U.S. cities have adopted “formula retail” restrictions or even outright bans, which can specifically limit fast food establishments or other businesses—such as liquor stores or tobacco shops—that do not support healthy choices)
- Zoning for uses that **support healthy choices**, or preferences for projects that support healthy choices (for instance, zoning ordinances can explicitly identify grocery stores as an allowable activity)
- Regulations that support the development of multifamily housing, schools, and other essential community establishments in **locations that are distant from highways** and other sources of air pollution

### Closing message:

*Good zoning supports the development of attractive, prosperous communities. It also helps create healthy communities.*