

POLICY FORUM

Promoting Healthy and Sustainable Communities

Introduction

Often the NCMJ delves into particular health issues or areas of concern in health or health care. With this issue, however, we took a slightly different approach by deciding to examine collaborations happening at the state, regional, and local level that are aimed at making the communities we live in healthier.

The North Carolina Departments of Transportation, Commerce, Environment and Natural Resources, and the Division of Public Health in the Department of Health and Human Services are partnering on shared concerns to enhance health. Each of these agencies has, within its own mission, the goal of improving some aspect of quality of life in North Carolina. Effective transportation systems, robust local economies with plentiful jobs, open space and clean air and water, and a solid public health infrastructure shape the health of our communities, and thus ultimately shape our health, too.

At first glance, the work of these departments seems unrelated, but in fact, the work of each impacts the other in some way, the health of North Carolinians, and communities in our state. Communities come alive when the health of the community is viewed with a broader lens. In this issue brief, Petersen and colleagues expand the vision of public health to include variables such as health equity, clean water and air, safe and reliable transportation choices, and adequate housing, income, and education. These state agencies and many others groups like the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project, the North Carolina Association of Regional Councils, the planning profession, and local governments are therefore invested in making our state a “good health state,” as Chenoweth puts it.

Enhancing our built environment is central to doing this. While some of the greatest advances in reducing the burden of disease and improving the quality of life in the 20th century were achieved by improved sanitation and housing, administration of vaccines, fluoridation of water, and the discovery of antibiotics among other things, some of the greatest advances in reducing the burden of disease in this 21st century will come from solutions to health problems stemming, at least in part, from suburbanization. Land use and the built environment are increasingly becoming important to the public’s health. In fact, the Community Preventive Services Task Force of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has evidence-based recommendations regarding urban design and land use policies. Silver eloquently explains how planners and public health professionals are coming together and “finding common ground” to make communities healthier. Making the built environment one that facilitates active living is one way to reduce the burden of obesity on our state. And this is a “win” for everyone. A state with healthier people is one that is attractive to businesses, which is clearly a boon to the state’s economy.

Health and health care professionals are leaders in their communities and should embrace, collaborate, and advocate for public policy solutions, systems, and built environment changes that support healthy and sustainable communities, and thus healthy North Carolinians. NCMJ

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