



“Jobs, Housing & Property Rights”

October 18, 2010

Mr. Jeff Smith, Chairman
Planning Commission
County of Humboldt
825 Fifth Street, Room 111
Eureka, California 95501

Subject: Circulation Element, General Plan Update

Dear Chairman Smith and Planning Commissioners:

We offer these comments regarding the Circulation Element of the General Plan update.

As you know, the discussions regarding the health status of folks living in rural areas versus urban areas, has been an on-going debate for several years. We have read several analytical reports written by various authors, including what Humboldt County Health Officer, Dr. Ann Lindsay has to say on the subject.

There are a number of criteria that factor into the equation of whether people are healthy, or not. Certainly exercise plays a major role in most people’s health. However there is no real proof that urban people get more exercise than rural residents. In fact, just the opposite case can be made. Other issues that are primary to the health of our population, is the eating habits of people. According to some studies, low-income people tend to eat less healthy food -- are more overweight, and therefore less healthy.

We cannot arrive at the same conclusions Dr. Lindsay draws from her hypothesis, and would ask that you consider the attached articles, and write-ups:

- Sacramento Bee newspaper, December 23, 2009 article: *“Schoolkids struggling to stay fit, especially in poor neighborhoods”*
- Ben Sheppard’s *“Health...Rural vs Urban Living”*, dated November 19, 2009
- Chuck Ciancio’s letter to your Planning Commission dated April 17, 2008, found at: <http://co.humboldt.ca.us/iisearch.asp?departments=&site=&strSearch=rural+vs+urban+health>

We support you in your efforts to draft a Circulation Element which best meets the County’s needs over the coming 20 plus years. Please consider the attached findings before concluding that rural people are less healthy than those living in urban areas.

Sincerely,
Kay Backer
Kay Backer, representing
Humboldt Economic and Land Plan

cc: County Board of Supervisors
Carolyn Ruth, Deputy County Counsel
Kirk A. Girard, Community Development Services Director
Kathy Hayes, Clerk of the Board
Siana Watts, Planning Commission Clerk
Bonnie Blackberry, Civil Liberties Monitoring Project

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Sacramento Bee
December 23, 2009

Schoolkids struggling to stay fit, especially in poor neighborhoods

Numbers show poverty a factor in how schools perform on state's test

By Diana Lambert

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Students at [Dyer-Kelly Elementary School](#) are in pretty bad shape.

The [Sacramento](#) school had the highest percentage of overweight fifth-graders in the region last year, according to the recently released California Physical [Fitness Test](#).

The state test showed that 64 percent of Dyer-Kelly students were at an unhealthy weight, and only 17 percent passed the state physical fitness tests.

"We have them for six hours, and we try to make them as productive as we can," Principal [Deborah Wegsteen](#) said. "They play and run and are very active at recess time. But you don't know what they have access to at home."

Home for these students is in a poor area – Wegsteen said the [poverty level](#) is close to 100 percent.

And poverty is one of the factors in determining unhealthy lifestyle.

The physical fitness tests don't reveal that. They test the students in six areas, including body fat. But what the fitness tests don't reveal, other data do.

A Bee comparison of the number of overweight students in area schools and the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunches paints a clear picture of how poverty can affect the health of children. And [family income](#) looms large in whether children are overweight, state data show.

Generally, the more students at a school who are poor enough to qualify for the federal lunch assistance program, the more overweight students at the school.

"Families with limited money tend to buy food high in calories, because it is satisfying," said [Joanne Ikeda](#), a nationally recognized expert on pediatric obesity.

Ikeda said poor families seldom buy fruit, vegetables or lean meats because they seem too expensive. She said kids from poor neighborhoods also are less likely to get as much physical activity as their wealthier counterparts.

"Some of these kids live in areas where there are parks that are not safe places to go," Ikeda said. "These are places drugs are sold and where needles are found in the sandbox."

Maybe it's the relative safety and wide open spaces of the foothills in addition to the overall higher income of the families there, but according to California Physical [Fitness Test](#) results, Placer and [El Dorado county](#) schoolchildren were more fit last year than [Sacramento](#) and [Yolo County](#) kids.

The study found that 29 percent of kids in [Sacramento County](#) and 30 percent in Yolo County were overweight, compared with 21 percent in [El Dorado County](#) and 20 percent in [Placer County](#).

Wegsteen wasn't surprised to learn that her school, at Bell Street and Edison Avenue in Sacramento, hadn't fared well on the state physical fitness test. She said school staff members started a program to encourage physical activity after similar results last year.

She said the children now have structured play during recess, including games, relays and other physical activity. They also have a Junior Giants Baseball program after school.

She said the school, which once had physical education five days a week, now has a physical education specialist only two days a week. Teachers have had to step in to keep kids active and ensure they get the state-required hours of physical education.

Statewide, 1.38 million students in the fifth, seventh and ninth grades took the six physical fitness tests last year that make up the state's Fitnessgram. The students were tested for flexibility, aerobic capacity and abdominal, upper body and trunk extensor strength, as well as body fat composition.

Twenty-nine percent of the state's fifth-graders, 34 percent of its seventh-graders and 38 percent of its ninth-graders were in the healthy range in all six test areas. All three grades made small improvements over the year before.

Thirty-seven percent of the students tested in the four-county Sacramento region passed all six areas of the physical fitness test.

Ikeda, the pediatric obesity expert, said children are overweight because they are too sedentary – watching television, making phone calls and playing hand-held games. "What has happened is we have an environment very conducive to children putting on weight," she said.

She said children also are drinking too much soda and eating too many fast-food meals and snacks high in fat and sugar.

Sugary snacks are frowned upon by the staff of [Thomas Jefferson Elementary](#) in Roseville, where the region's highest percentage of trim fifth-graders are educated. Only 3.6 percent of last year's fifth-graders were overweight, according to the study.

Principal [Barbara Jelich](#) said parents are encouraged to bring fruit or buy a book for the library to celebrate birthdays instead of bringing cake or cupcakes.

She said the school is in a neighborhood with active families who encourage kids to play sports. Only 14 percent of the students are eligible for the federal lunch assistance program.

Last week, [Thomas Jefferson's](#) fourth-graders were in the multipurpose room dancing, running and exercising. The physical [education](#) specialist, [Elena Rizzuto](#), used a break in the class to encourage the children to stay active over the holidays.

The students seemed to get the message.

"If you don't stay fit, you won't get exercise and that won't be good for your body," fourth-grader [Jessica Donahue](#) said after she finished her workout.

Rizzuto, who works with each grade level three times a week, said despite [budget cuts](#) Roseville City School District leaders have elected to keep physical education programs.

[Marina Village](#) Middle School in El Dorado Hills also has been able to maintain its physical education program. The school has a plethora of sports programs and after-school enrichment programs that include Pilates, kickboxing and a walking club.

The school had the highest percentage of trim seventh-graders in the four-county area last year, with only 10 percent considered to be at an unhealthy weight.

The school, where only 4 percent of students are eligible for the lunch assistance program, also has a ban on soda on campus and limits the dessert offerings in the cafeteria.

"We have a great staff, and they have put together a program to help kids to stay healthy and pursue healthy lifestyles beyond class," said [Marina Village's](#) principal, [Jeff Warshaw](#).

The physical education program includes a half-mile run each Monday, a mile run each Wednesday and a mile-and-a-half run each Friday, Warshaw said.

Not all schools with a high population of poor students did poorly on the Fitnessgram. Both Newcastle Charter and Newcastle Elementary schools, near [Auburn](#) in [Placer County](#), had low percentages of overweight children last school year – 6 percent and 7 percent respectively. Both report that all of their students are eligible for the federal lunch program.

Schools that fared poorly on the test can expect little more than a bruised ego as a result. The state's public schools are required only to post the results of the fitness test on their school accountability report cards and to distribute individual results to students.

"Basically, we recommend that districts use this information to look at their curriculum to develop programs to increase the student's physical fitness level that will include activities that the children can do for the rest of their lives," said Linda Hooper of the California Department of Education.

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HEALTH....RURAL vs URBAN LIVING

One of the reasons that supporters of General Plan Rewrite Option A give is that urban living is more healthy because of less reliance on cars and increased walking for goods and services. In fact Dr. Ann Lindsay, Humboldt County Health Officer, reported those conclusions to the Planning Commission indicating that urbanization is healthy.

Conventional wisdom would make one believe that this could not be true, since living in a more rural areas forces you to be more active. Dr. Lindsay used San Francisco as an example of a dense urban place which has a low diabetes rate, an acceptable measure of a population's health. San Francisco County's diabetes rate is 3.94 percent of the population while Humboldt County's is 8.35 percent. This is a significant difference since San Francisco has a density of 16,634 people per square mile and Humboldt County has a density of 35.4.

Any analysis that could have significant effect on public policy such as the choice of where you can live in the future, must have a thorough review. There are several data sources that can shed light on this conclusion. The California Diabetes Project has collected data on all of the counties in California and the diabetes rate can be a good indicator of the health of a population since increased obesity rates can also lead to increased rates of diabetes. It is clear that San Francisco has a very low diabetes rate and ours is very high. The question that begs to be asked is does this simple conclusion apply directly to other areas or are there other factors that may be more significant?

The ten least dense counties have an average diabetes rate of 6.92% while the ten most dense counties have a diabetes rate of 5.35%, which is 1.57% less. It strikes me that one of the most significant differences between San Francisco County and Humboldt County besides density is median income. Humboldt County has a median income of \$27,348 while San Francisco County has a median income of \$39,187, a significant difference.

The ten counties with the lowest median income have a diabetes rate of 7.97% while the ten counties with the highest median incomes have a diabetes rate of 5.32%, a difference of 2.65%. The difference between density and income shows that income seems to have a more significant effect on the diabetes rate than density. Imperial is the poorest county with a median income of \$22,962 and a diabetes rate of 10.03% and Tulare is next with a median income of \$24,774 and a diabetes rate of 10.39. Marin is the wealthiest county with a median income of \$48,854 and a diabetes rate of 3.26% and San Mateo County has a median income of \$45,992 and a diabetes rate of 5.31%. An analysis of the median incomes and diabetes rates shows a direct correlation between income and diabetes rates. An analysis of population density shows little correlation between density and diabetes rates.

It is clear that income has a more significant impact on health than does density. Understanding this should encourage our government leaders to consider improving our economy as the driving force behind the general plan rewrite rather than keeping people from living in rural areas.

- Ben Shepherd