

# Building Public Understanding: The Link Between Health and Planning

How can the public participate in planning for health? Which Design for Health tools can be used in participation processes or modified for such use? This fact sheet deals with these two issues in turn.

## Participation in Local Planning Processes

The public can play an important part in planning processes that address the link between health and the built environment. Public involvement in planning processes is widely recognized for its ability to build support for plan implementation and create a shared understanding of planning problems and solutions. There are numerous opportunities to engage the public in these types of planning processes, as well as in the use of the Health Impact Assessment (HIA) tools.

It is important to think broadly about who might be a stakeholder relative to the planning issues you are addressing. Stakeholders may include the general public, but also:

- elected and appointed officials
- representatives of organizations and businesses
- non-planning staff in your local government unit
- staff from external agencies.
- members of human services or environmental advocacy group.

There are a number of typical participation efforts that occur in most planning processes, whether conducting a comprehensive plan update, developing a trails and greenways plan, creating a master plan and design guidelines for a redevelopment area, or updating a stormwater management plan and associated policies. These participation efforts, and possible opportunities to address health and planning, are noted below:

**Open House.** Planners often conduct open house meetings early in planning processes to gather input from the public. These meetings are often unstructured, without formal presentations, and may include a series of information stations and interactive activities that participants can engage in as a group or individually. These types of meetings lend themselves to one-on-one contact between participants and staff, creating opportunities for discussion about key health and planning topics.

- Information stations might provide basic health statistics for the community, connecting that information to the planning issue being addressed. For example, information on asthma rates might be provided alongside a map that shows those homes that are located within 500 meters (one-third mile) of major roads (i.e. freeway or roadway with six lanes or more).
- Comment forms might ask people to define good health or to name key health issues.
- In formal presentations, presenters might highlight the interconnections among various health impacts associated with key planning issues. For example, if transit is an area of focus in the community, presenters might discuss the impacts that increased transit use and transit oriented development can have on air quality, social capital, physical activity, accessibility, food, and safety.

**Advisory Committee Meetings.** Communities often establish advisory committees as part of planning processes. They are often organized as a cross-section of the community, ensuring representation of key interests in the community and the local government. In some cases, members are selected based on their technical expertise, in other cases, committees may consist of more general public representatives. Because of the smaller number of participants and the opportunity build knowledge over a series of committee meetings, advisory committees represent a great opportunity engage the public around issues of health and planning.

- Early meetings might focus on prioritizing key health concerns and key planning concerns and then identifying overlaps between the two lists. This type of discussion can help focus participants on the connections between health and planning and identify planning efforts that might have positive impacts on multiple health issues.
- Discussions might also focus on how to integrate health into a planning document, whether as a single element or across elements in the plan. Gathering feedback from potential users of the plan can be very useful.

**Public Hearings.** Most planning decisions, whether project, plan, or policy approval, require a public hearing.

- While general public participation in these meetings is often limited to providing brief comments before an elected or appointed body, there may also be opportunities for planning staff to provide brief presentations. Presentations on the connection between health and planning can help set the stage for discussions among council or commission members that follow. Further, the presentation can provide a base of information for the public and decision-makers to refer to in later discussions.
- Presentations made at public hearings may be televised and presentation materials may be available on community web sites, thus reaching a larger audience than those attending the hearing.

**Meetings with Key Groups.** An additional proactive effort to engage the public in addressing health and planning is to reach out to key stakeholder groups that may have an interest in a particular health issue, such as a bicycle club, school district, environmental organization, or transit advocacy group.

- Meetings with key groups can provide a useful opportunity to collect information about stakeholders' preferences for particular planning outcomes.
- These meetings can also provide an opportunity to present information to stakeholders about the range of health benefits associated with the specific issue that they are concerned with, helping to make connections among the health issues and the built environment.

## Using Design For Health Tools

The Design for Health HIA tools can all be used in a variety of public and participatory settings. The opportunities and uses vary, depending on the tool that each community selects.

**Simple Questions About Health.** Simply adding a question about health in an existing meeting can put health on the agenda. Questions might include the following taken from the more elaborate HIA tools. These range from the very broad to the very specific:

- “Define good health” (graffiti board question from Rapid Assessment)
- “What are the potential impacts on health, positive and negative, arising from the implementation of your plan?” (Rapid Assessment)
- “Does the project or plan affect vulnerable groups (e.g. children, older people, people with lower incomes)?” (Preliminary Checklist)
- “Is the plan or project occurring in a place where specific local health problems have been identified (e.g. traffic safety, air quality, lack of health foods, contaminated brownfields)?” (Preliminary Checklist)
- “Are there supermarkets or fruit and vegetable stores located within a mile of each home?” (Preliminary Checklist)

Any of these questions will help start a productive conversation. The HIAs also include a number of other questions that may also be useful.

**HIA Preliminary Checklist.** The preliminary checklist is the first step in the HIA process and issued to identify health issues and determine if further assessment is needed. The checklist has a simple design that can be easily completed in a short period of time.

- Because the preliminary checklist addresses a wide range of health issues, it can be effective educational tool for participants in larger public meetings or in smaller advisory committee meetings. The tool makes clear connections between the size and scope of a project, plan, or policy and potential health impacts. Further, the specific thresholds specified in Part 2 of the preliminary checklist provide basic information about how project, plan, or policy components relate to various health issues. For example, the HIA provides basic information about how density relates to accessibility, specifying a density standard that should be achieved to minimize negative health impacts. Completing the preliminary checklist in a public setting, requires that facilitators provide some basic information about the project, plan, or policy to be evaluated so that participants can work from a consistent base of information. Small group discussions, at individual tables in a larger meeting or as part of committee meeting, can provide a great opportunity for participants to learn from each other as they complete the worksheet.

**HIA Rapid Assessment.** The rapid assessment is specifically designed as a participatory tool. It is intended to be conducted as an interactive workshop that brings together stakeholders to identify and assess health impacts. Stakeholders might include an existing comprehensive plan advisory committee or an ad hoc group, with participants selected to represent key interests and disciplines. Preparing for

the workshop may take several weeks, but produces valuable information that can help participants work from a common understanding of the task and promote a productive workshop environment.

- The workshop can focus on a range of issues related to health and planning, including discussions about potential health impacts associated with a project, plan or policy, and discussions about how health relates to comprehensive plans or other planning documents.
- Specific participation techniques can include a graffiti board, small group breakout sessions, and facilitated large group discussions.

**HIA Threshold Analysis.** The threshold analysis is the most detailed of the three Design for Health HIA tools. It is a spreadsheet based tool that is primarily completed by planners in the office. However, there are two key opportunities for public engagement.

- First, at the beginning of the process, planners can get the public involved in prioritizing among the health topics addressed in the threshold analysis. This prioritization discussion might lead adjustments in scoring to reflect local concerns.
- Second, after completing the threshold analysis, the results can provide an excellent source of information for discussion in a public meeting or advisory committee setting. Planners might discuss the threshold analysis process and the findings and then facilitate a discussion about how the outcomes might be used to inform a decision about a proposed project, plan, or policy.