FACT SHEET

National Center for Environmental Health
Division of Emergency and Environmental Health Services

Designing and Building Healthy Places

The Division of Emergency and Environmental Health Services of the National Center for Environmental Health provides national leadership in the development of environmental public health policy and prevention programs to improve public health practice nationwide. The interaction between people and their environments, natural as well as human-made, continues to emerge as a major issue concerning public health professionals.

Health and Healthy Places

According to the World Health Organization, health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. A healthy community, as described by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' *Healthy People 2010* report, is one that continuously creates and improves both its physical and social environments. Such communities help people to support one another in aspects of daily life and to develop to their fullest potential. Healthy places are those designed and built to improve the quality of life for all people who live, work, worship, learn, and play within their borders. They also provide easy access and connectivity to other communities—places where every person is free to make choices amid a variety of healthy, available, accessible, and affordable options.

Healthy Environments

Since 1900, life expectancy in the United States has increased by approximately 40 years. Only 7 of those years can be attributed to improvements in disease care; the rest are the result of improved prevention efforts and improved environmental conditions, including sanitation and water. The link between the nation's health and the environment is unmistakable.

A healthy community environment encompasses aspects of human health, disease, and injury that are determined or influenced by factors in the overall environment. Examining the interaction between health and the environment requires studying how health is directly affected by various chemical, physical, and biologic agents. We must also consider the effects of factors in the broad physical and social environments, which include housing, urban development, land use, transportation, industry, and agriculture.

Healthy Community Design

In April 2002, the American Planning Association identified six qualities that describe healthy community design. According to the association, healthy communities

- have a unique sense of community and place;
- preserve and enhance valuable natural and cultural resources;

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- equitably distribute the costs and benefits of development;
- expand the range of transportation, employment, and housing choices in a fiscally responsible manner;
- value long-range, regionwide sustainability rather than short-term, incremental, or geographically isolated actions; and
- promote public health and healthy communities.

Developers are finding a market for neighborhoods that are friendly to pedestrians, children, bicycles, neighbors, the elderly, and people with disabilities.

With good planning, it is possible to design or redesign new or existing communities to enhance well-being, as in the following ways:

- promoting revitalization and development that best uses existing infrastructure;
- promoting the creation of mixed-use communities that integrate a range of housing and commercial services and serve a variety of income levels;
- promoting bicycle- and pedestrian-oriented design;
- preserving open spaces, such as parks, forests, and wildlife corridors; and
- encouraging brownfields cleanup and development to invigorate urban centers, older suburbs, and rural towns.

NCEH's activities promoting healthy places include the following:

- Co-sponsored and edited the September 2003 special issue of the *American Journal of Public Health*, which focused on topics related to health and the built environment.
- Sponsored a workshop to focus research on areas needing further work to promote health in built environments.
- Co-sponsored a workshop on using health impact assessments (HIA) to examine the consequences of projects and policies outside of the health sector (e.g., transportation planning) that affect health and an HIA training for public health and planning practitioners in February 2006.
- Co-sponsored work by the American Planning Association to develop model zoning codes that promote development of healthy, walkable communities.
- Developed a walkability audit for workplace settings and conducted an audit on CDC campuses.
- Co-sponsoring the development of a certification process for healthy communities modeled on the national certification for energy-efficient buildings.
- Co-sponsored with the National Institutes of Health and CDC's National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion the request for research proposals on obesity and the built environment.
- Provided supplemental funding to two Prevention Research Centers to examine differences in objectively-measured physical activity levels in individuals who move from neighborhoods with one level of walkability to neighborhoods with a different level of walkability.

For more information about designing and building healthy places, go to http://www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/.