



Where we put our homes, businesses, places of play, transportation systems and natural areas directly affects how much physical activity we get, how much healthy food we eat, whether we get sick from poor air and water quality and whether we feel safe and connected to our communities. If the built environment influences health, then the decisions planners make for the future of a community also have health impacts on that community.

Planners are rediscovering the intersection between health and good community design and the impact that planners and decision makers can have on public health.

The *Health and Safety Background Report* characterizes a wide range of health issues as part of the City of Portland's comprehensive planning efforts. The report summarizes what is currently known about Portland's health and safety, describes conclusions from national studies about the relationship between health and community design and presents potential policy options the City could explore to support health.

The Portland Plan presents an opportunity to more clearly outline the positive impacts municipal planning can have on individual and community health and how we may consider further health impacts as we plan for the next several decades. This report is intended to contribute to public conversation around health as a planning issue and to allow fuller consideration of policy choices and investment priorities.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Rising rates of obesity, diabetes, chronic disease, cancer and asthma represent some of our greatest health challenges. Although rates in Portland are generally on par or better than rates in surrounding counties and the nation as a whole, they are well above national targets – and they are continuing to rise.

These health outcomes can affect the city's communities disproportionately. Studies have confirmed that individuals and communities with lower incomes, educational attainment and status tend to have poorer health and shorter life spans than those with higher incomes and wealth. Portland has areas of concentrated poverty and lower educational attainment, and evidence indicates that some health outcomes (e.g., asthma) and behaviors (e.g., amount of physical activity) do vary in different areas and communities throughout the city.



Some existing City goals and policies contribute to promoting and protecting the health of Portlanders.

The City of Portland’s current Comprehensive Plan includes a broad range of policies that work to promote health. The City’s coordinated land use and transportation, housing, economic development, environmental and public safety policies create a strong foundation for protecting and promoting health in the community. In the pursuit of these goals, many steps Portland has taken have also supported community health. For example, the city’s extensive network of bike lanes and pedestrian paths, commitment to walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods and strong transit system all are in line with the recommendations coming out of recent research on community health promotion. However, Portland has a long way to go to ensure that the benefits of a healthy community extend to all of its residents, and to ensure that negative health burdens are minimized for our most vulnerable populations.

The City of Portland can influence community health by considering it during the planning process and by supporting policies, programs and investment priorities that will help improve health determinants and encourage healthy behavior choices. Specifically, the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability can focus efforts on directing urban development in a manner that supports community health and economic, educational and social equity.

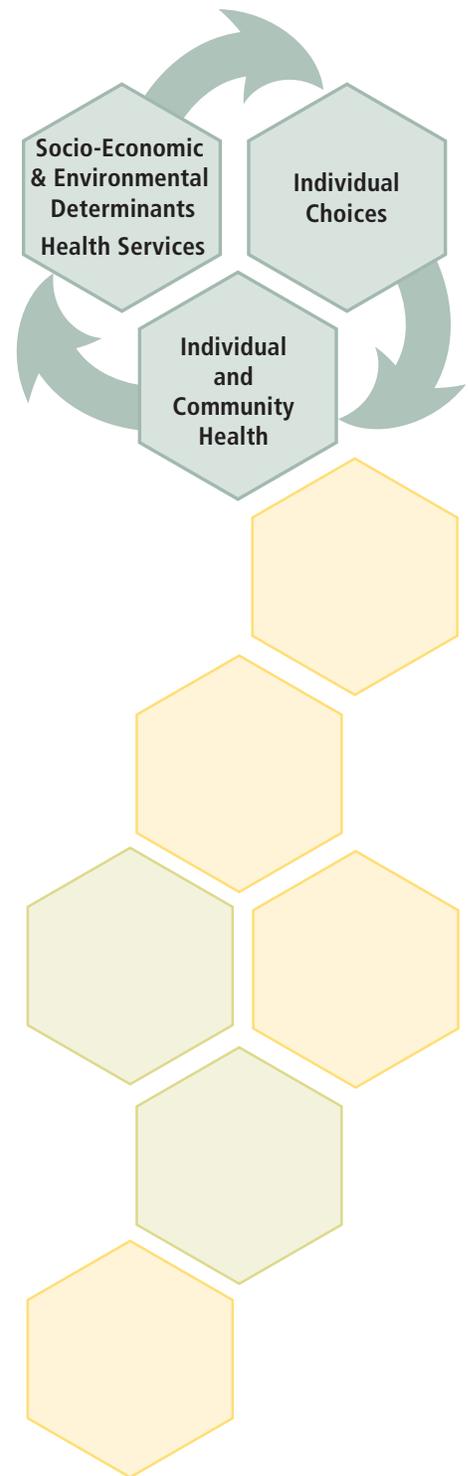
A planning goal describing the City’s commitment to health would further integrate health in the City’s comprehensive planning framework. The City could also refocus the language of existing policies to highlight their intended impacts on health to reestablish their foundational purpose: to protect and improve the lives and health of all Portlanders.

To better integrate consideration of public health into planning decisions, the City should establish partnerships and policies that support collaboration between local health officials, the community and planners in creating planning policy and priorities.

Without health as a planning lens, future decisions made through the Portland Plan could cause unintended consequences that would undermine our community’s physical and mental health. In addition, careful planning could ameliorate some local health disparities. The City of Portland should explicitly consider health when making planning and investment decisions so that the resulting physical environment makes healthy choices easy.

Access to Healthy Foods

People with easy access to healthful foods, and limited access to unhealthy foods, tend to eat more fruits and vegetables and have improved nutrition and overall health. In general, Portland is rich in food outlets, with strong networks of grocery stores, farmers’ markets and community-supported agriculture (CSAs) providing multiple places to procure healthful, local and organic food. However, some areas of Portland are underserved by full-service grocery stores and farmers markets; many of these areas have relatively high concentrations of poverty and demand for food assistance services continues to rise. The City of Portland should encourage expanded access to healthy foods by planning for new food outlets, creating support-



ive regulatory environments for healthful food and agriculture and incorporating food access and urban agriculture into community design.

Access to Walking and Biking Networks

Many Portland residents do not get adequate daily exercise. In fact, less than half of people at a healthy weight exercise the recommended amount. To ensure opportunities for active living and physical activity, the City must continue to (1) pursue coordinated land use and transportation systems that put people within walking and biking distance of the destinations and services they need, (2) continue to improve pedestrian and bicycle networks and (3) address safety issues. While Portland's bike network has improved extensively over the past 20 years, there are still areas of the city where bike infrastructure is poor and cycling rates are low. The pedestrian environment has notable strengths, especially in inner neighborhoods and downtown, but it is limited in East and Southwest Portland by a disconnected sidewalk network.

Access to Parks, Recreation and Natural Areas

Recreational opportunities in Portland are numerous and diverse. However, some parts of the city have fewer options for active recreation than others, and gaps exist throughout the city for different recreational opportunities. Only half of all City residents live within a half mile of a developed park. Significant areas of the city have limited walkable access to natural areas, and some areas lack play areas, aquatic facilities and other recreation facilities. The City of Portland and its partners must ensure equitable distribution of and access to recreational opportunities such as parks, natural areas, recreation centers and programs, trails and gardens.

Outdoor Air Quality

In general, Portland's air quality has improved over the past five years. However, Portland still faces problems with toxic air pollutants, particularly in areas close to freeways. The city's benzene levels are rising and are eight times higher than national ambient air quality standards. These high levels of benzene and other pollutants associated with motor vehicles translate into high relative cancer risks, particularly in North and Northeast Portland, downtown and areas along highways. Negative health impacts could be further concentrated by the city's land use policies that cluster high-density development near transportation corridors. The areas that have the poorest air quality also have a high proportion of low-income and ethnic/racial minorities, a fact that raises potential equity issues. The City of Portland should continue to work to improve outdoor air quality through coordinated land use and transportation systems, development of alternative transportation networks, and separation of industrial uses.

Indoor Air Quality

On average, people spend about 90 percent of their time indoors, putting them at risk of exposure to pollutants found in indoor air. Examples include radon, environmental tobacco smoke, biological contaminants, combustion-related pollutants and pesticides. These pollutants have known health impacts such as higher risks for respiratory irritation, asthma and cancer. The City of Portland can work to address certain indoor pollutants



through building codes and standards that regulate building materials and construction; through programs that encourage testing and remediation for pollutants such as radon, lead and asbestos; and through awareness and education programs about the importance of personal choices.

Surface Water Quality

Water quality in the Willamette River and the Columbia Slough has shown significant improvements (from “poor” to “fair”) in the past five years, in part because of reductions in combined sewer overflows (CSOs). However, people who swim, boat or fish in some local waters face real health risks from water quality problems associated with the remaining combined sewer overflows, non-point source pollution, historical pollution and the impacts of upstream activities. Continued improvements to address combined sewer overflows and clean up the Portland Harbor Superfund Site will significantly improve the health of our major rivers. To further improve the quality of the City’s rivers and streams, additional efforts will be needed to reduce, control and treat non-point source pollution and emerging pollutants.

Drinking Water

Portland’s drinking water currently meets or exceeds the existing stringent water quality standards set by the federal Safe Drinking Water Act – mainly because Portland has a protected drinking water source. However, at least two issues related to drinking water remain. First, the City may be required to make substantial capital improvements to its water system in order to comply with new federal rules intended to reduce the risks of illness from *Cryptosporidium*. Second, fluoride is not naturally found in Portland’s drinking water. The Portland Water Bureau does not add fluoride to the city’s water, although this practice is recommended by the U.S. Public Health Service to prevent tooth decay.

Access to Health Care

Not all Portlanders have equitable access to health care. However, because the City of Portland does not directly provide health care to its citizens, the City’s ability to affect health care access is limited. Additionally, many of the factors affecting access to health care are beyond the scope of this assessment and are tied to a number of other socioeconomic, equity and cultural issues. Regardless, the issue of equitable access to health care deeply affects residents’ quality of life and cannot be ignored. The City can work to address larger socioeconomic issues that affect health care access and collaborate with private and public providers—particularly Multnomah County—to ensure that health care facilities are appropriately and equitably sited and served by transportation infrastructure. Further conversations with health care providers and stakeholders should shape the City’s work in this area.



Fire and Medical Response

During fiscal year 2007-2008, Portland Fire and Rescue responded to a record number of incidents—more than 65,700. Two-thirds of these were medical emergencies, and 3 percent were fire incidents. This represents the lowest number of fire incidents in 50 years. Over the last 10 years, the number of fire incidents has declined 22 percent, while the number of medical incidents has increased 40 percent.

The City of Portland continues to face challenges in meeting its fire and emergency response time goals. In 2007, the most recent year available, the response time for both fire and medical emergency calls was more than a minute longer than the Bureau's target time.

Crime

In general, residents' safety and their perception of safety have improved over the past decade. Since 1998, Portland's crime rate has declined 51 percent for person crimes and 28 percent for property crimes. In 2008, most residents felt safe walking alone in their neighborhoods during the day, and more than half of residents felt safe walking alone in their neighborhoods at night. Residents in East Portland neighborhoods tend to have higher crime rates and perceptions of fear than other areas of the city.

Emergency Preparedness

Natural hazards such as severe weather, landslides, flooding, wildfires and earthquakes pose a real threat to the safety of Portland residents. Safeguarding people and the environment from natural disasters requires a coordinated and collaborative community partnership. Identifying, planning for and mitigating natural hazards to permanently reduce or alleviate losses of life and property will require a range of strategies including planning, policy changes, projects and improving public awareness. These activities are the responsibility of individuals, private businesses and industries, as well as local, state and federal governments.

Not all Portlanders have sufficient access to preventive or emergency care. This may limit their ability to receive adequate health care when needed. Portland has seen an increase in the number of emergency medical incidents over the past ten years. Response times for fire and medical emergencies exceed targets in many parts of the city.

