

COUGHABLE VS. WALKABLE STOCKTON

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Record Columnist

If a city's design can help to make its citizens healthier or unhealthier, then Stockton is killing us.

As our environment reporter wrote this week, three out of 10 San Joaquin County residents are obese. Two out of 10 have asthma. And roughly one out of 10 has diabetes.

Of course, city design is not the sole culprit. There are environmental issues, economic factors, cultural influences and personal decisions. If you eat Baconators all the time, don't blame the built environment.

But design matters. Spanos Park West built housing so far from shops most residents must drive. The eastern stretches of Hammer Lane are a complete drag to walk. Big tracts of south Stockton are food deserts void of fresh produce.

And so on.

"There can in fact be an impact on human health through the built environment," said Tom Eitler, a vice president of the Urban Land Institute. "The development community - at the progressive and the cutting edges - it's all about walkability, making exercise easier, access to healthy foods."

If city planning forces people into cars; or if people can't conveniently access healthy foods; or if they are unable - or scared - to walk or to bike, or to hang out at parks and plazas, community health plunges, Eitler said.

Public health officials are lobbying planners to absorb this and change their sprawlish ways.

"Planning and health considerations have often existed independently despite clear connections between the two," the heads of two health organizations wrote the local Council of Governments.

They urged supes to consider healthy urban design a legal requirement. They cited SB 375. That law requires communities to link transportation and land-use planning to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from driving.

I don't see why the discussion must take place in the context of any particular law. If building cities right contributes to public health then municipal government and builders have an obligation to build cities right.

The public should demand it.

Which means what? Well, widen sidewalks. Make them feel safe and pleasant with lighting and trees. That encourages walking and biking.

Calm traffic. Like the Miracle Mile stretch of Pacific Avenue did.

"People will not walk as part of their daily routine, unless there are at least two ingredients:" the ULI writes. "First, there must be attractive or important destinations to walk to (like a healthy downtown, a major park, a school, etc.) ...

" ... and second the walking route must be safe and interesting. People simply don't like to walk along busy arterials, past empty parking lots or along ugly commercial strips."

Locate housing near jobs. Densify by building up, not out. Put a heart in a district with a plaza. Zone for mixed use; build a lot of different stuff close together.

A recent Australian study found, "In neighborhoods with different types of destinations (a shop, ... delicatessen, DVD store, post office, supermarket) people walked an additional 5.8 minutes per week for each one present."

The study also found, "If they had access to local recreational destinations (e.g., a park, a sports field, a beach), people walked an additional 21 minutes per week for each type available."

The ULI says the right ratio of parks to people is 10 acres/1,000 residents. Incorporated Stockton with 300,000 people, therefore, should have 3,000 acres of parks. It has 645.

But, "It is not enough to just build a new downtown park," the ULI writes. "It needs a regular schedule of activities: Zumba classes, health fairs, farmers

markets, community celebrations, etc. In other words, to make a 'space' become a 'place,' you need people and activities."

The law does not need to cram best practices down the development industry's throat. When voting on proposed building projects, local planning commissions and councils should simply make healthy choices.

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