

SpotLight #7: Making the Public Health/Smart Growth Connection

Abstract

In recent years public health researchers and practitioners have become increasingly aware of close linkages between community design, land development and investment patterns, and public health. Development and investment patterns characterized by suburban sprawl have been shown to have a variety of negative effects on public health while; conversely, smarter growth patterns can bring positive public health effects. This article examines smart growth's relationship to public health through air quality, urban environmental issues and environmental justice, and physical activity levels. It highlights the work of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Liberty Hill Foundation, the Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust, the Bauman Family Foundation, and several other members of the Funders' Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities as funders that are forging and exploring these linkages through their charitable giving.

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Development and investment patterns have been shown to impact air quality, urban brownfields, and resident physical activity levels. Each of these factors in turn directly impacts the quality of public health. Philanthropic funders involved in these issues are also increasingly coming to understand these connections, and are funding research, advocacy, and programs that aim to improve both public health and community livability through the smart growth agenda.

Urban Disinvestment: Social Equity, Urban Environmental Quality, and Public Health. The concentrated poverty of many urban core areas, caused or reinforced by suburban sprawl and urban disinvestment, goes hand in hand with environmental pollution and contamination in the inner city that adversely impacts the health of urban residents. Those involved in brownfields redevelopment efforts are actively engaged in these linkages, and are also aware of the racial and economic components of the existence and remediation of these toxic environments.

The Funders' Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities, through its Social Equity and Justice Project, has made progress in articulating and building a constituency for the convergence of interests between the environmental justice and smart growth movements. Member foundations are actively engaged in funding activities that simultaneously promote urban reinvestment, social equity, brownfields reclamation, and improved public health.

Land Use and Transportation Patterns, Air Quality, and Respiratory Health. A second linkage between public health and land use comes in the form of air quality. Suburban sprawl development patterns that rely primarily or exclusively on the automobile for resident mobility

can result in poor air quality, which in turn can cause or exacerbate respiratory illnesses, including childhood asthma. Many Network member foundations are involved in funding the study and promotion of transportation alternatives – such as walking, biking, and public transit – that improve air quality while creating communities that are more livable, sustainable, affordable, and aesthetically pleasing.

Sprawl, Physical Inactivity, and the Obesity Epidemic. It is also becoming more widely established that communities designed to include a variety of transportation alternatives also promote physical activity, a third linkage between public health and community design.

A growing body of evidence suggests that physical inactivity can contribute to obesity, which in turn increases risk for a variety of diseases and ailments. Data from the public health, urban design, and transportation planning disciplines further suggest that such community characteristics as proximity of housing to facilities and businesses; street design; density; and availability of public transit, pedestrian, and bicycle facilities play a significant role in promoting or discouraging physical activity. Perceptions of public safety and comfort level – with respect to crime, traffic, and weather – also impact residents’ decisions to either rely on or get out of their cars. These linkages mean that community design and equitable infrastructure and development investment decisions can be potent tools for fighting the nation’s obesity epidemic and improving public health. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is on the cutting edge of research and policy development in this area, and has developed an Active Community Environments initiative in response to these findings.

Such funders as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation are beginning to take these linkages to the next level, creating funding initiatives that encourage communities to think about and use design choices to promote public health. In so doing, they are coming to see the common interests and constituencies between the public health and smart growth communities. The following brief foundation profiles illustrate how these linkages, interests, and constituencies are being built to mutual advantage.

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. As a foundation devoted to improving the health and health care of Americans, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation approaches the smart growth and community livability field from the perspective of public health. Headquartered in Princeton, NJ, the foundation has assets of \$9 billion and makes \$300 - \$400 million in grants annually. In recent months the foundation has increasingly come to understand and incorporate linkages between land use planning, the ability to obtain recommended levels of physical exercise via daily activities such as walking for errands, and impacts on individual health into its grantmaking programs.

The foundation’s objective in this area – which it calls “Active Living” – is to increase the number of communities with programs, policies and environments that promote active lifestyles. Building on community design initiatives and models, the foundation is promoting the (re)design of communities to support incidental daily physical activities such as walking and biking for transport. It is supporting community initiatives that include: environmental and policy interventions, communication and education campaigns, increased opportunities for individual physical activity, leveraging resources from transportation and recreation sources to make

needed infrastructure changes, supporting policy-related research, engaging relevant professions, and developing consumer demand for communities that support incidental daily physical activity. Grantmaking in this area totaled approximately \$28 million in 2001, up from \$12 million in 2000.

Approximately 75% of RWJF's funding is done through its national programs, some of which include re-granting. The Foundation's new national Active Living programs include the following:

- ***Active Living Policies and Environmental Studies (ALPES)***, a \$12.5 million national program located at San Diego State University to support investigator-initiated research to identify and assess structural, environmental, and policy changes with the potential to increase active living.
- ***Active Living by Design (ALbD)***, a \$16.5 million national program located at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill that will seek to infuse physical activity-promoting goals and processes into ongoing community planning efforts and would support the development and testing of 25 local community active living projects, with special efforts to reach low-income Americans.
- ***Pathways to Activity***, a resource center that will disseminate information, tools, and training to those communities that are interested in promoting health through physical activity, yet are unsure how to proceed. (\$4.5 million).
- ***Active Living Leadership***, a \$3.5 million project to educate and assist state and local officials in understanding the connections among community design, physical activity, and health.
- ***Active for Life***, part of a larger national program focusing on older adults and physical activity issues, this \$4.3 million project component is managed by the AARP and addresses specific community and access needs as well as community design issues.

The foundation also makes smaller individual grants, usually for the purposes of learning, new program development, field seeding, and to support opportunistically timed projects; some examples are: \$174,239 to St. Louis University, MO for development of indicators for activity-friendly communities; \$147,930 to Rutgers University Foundation for analysis of national data linking physical inactivity, chronic disease, and built environments; and \$129,491 to Durham Central Park (NC) for a two-year grant supporting the creation of an activity-friendly community in Durham Central Park.

Liberty Hill Foundation. Based in Santa Monica, CA, the Liberty Hill Foundation supports grassroots community organizations in Los Angeles County that empower people and challenge the policies, institutions and attitudes fostering inequality. As a non-endowed public charity, Liberty Hill Foundation does not have a permanent endowed asset base; the foundation raises its annual budget each year. It makes over \$3 million in grants annually.

The Liberty Hill Foundation's smart growth funding is approximately \$1.1 million per year, all within Los Angeles County. This includes the foundation's Fund for A New L.A., Environmental Justice Fund, and selected grants from the Seed Fund. Most of these grant programs are centered on reducing poverty and revitalizing urban areas through increased citizen activism and grassroots organizing.

The Foundation's Environmental Justice Fund supports grassroots organizations improving public health in low-income communities of color that suffer disproportionately from environmental pollution and cancer-causing toxins. Grants of \$1,000 to \$35,000 are given to community organizing, applied research, policy advocacy, litigation and/or popular education projects and groups working to decrease exposure to toxic substances in neighborhoods and workplaces.

For example, the foundation supports the Bus Riders' Union, a Los-Angeles group that advocates for the use of cleaner fuels in buses, as well as for environmental justice and equitable urban and transportation planning. Another grantee is linking brownfields redevelopment to school siting to affordable housing in the Los Angeles area. This organization – the Community Coalition for Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment – is on the cutting edge of another kind of public health/smart growth connection; it sees land use as one way to impact poverty and substance abuse behavior, linked by the existence of abandoned urban buildings and vacant lots. Still another type of connection is being explored by grantees focusing on the public health implications of dilapidated inner city housing, such as exposure to lead paint and other toxins, proximity to industrial sites, and air and water quality issues. The smart growth strategy of providing clean, safe, and affordable housing choices in urban areas is seen as one way to address these public and environmental health problems.

Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust. Administered by Hemenway & Barnes, a Boston-based law firm, the Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust is a six-state New England philanthropy making over \$3 million in grants annually in the areas of health, environment, education and the promotion of philanthropy. The Trust provides grants for research, organizing and advocacy, policy development, legal assistance and public education. The health program focuses on improving public health and health access, especially for low and moderate-income people. The environment program supports ecological health, with emphasis on sustainable forestry and fisheries, water and air quality protection, land use and transportation, environmental justice and toxics, and habitat and biodiversity protection. Under its education program, the Trust supports environmental education in the context of education reform and improved educational outcomes.

Over the last ten years, the Trust has expanded its grantmaking in environmental health with an interest in improving health outcomes for human and non-human residents of the region. The Trust has supported organizations, projects and joint campaigns and convenings focused on encouraging interdisciplinary science, improving policy and practice, strengthening and integrating data and information management, and developing constituencies and leadership.

The Trust supports a wide variety of public health efforts linked to smart growth strategies such as statewide obesity campaigns in Maine and Massachusetts, regional dirty power plant and mercury campaigns, regional transportation advocacy in Connecticut and Massachusetts, and

initiatives building alliances among consumers, health providers, scientists, educators and advocates focused on public health, housing, community development, transportation, climate change and health disparities. Under its philanthropy grant program, the Trust is supporting an innovation working with community development finance institutions to expand capacity that will better link community development organizations to public health, smart growth, and other interdisciplinary fields of interest. The Trust is especially interested in health sector leveraging to take more effective action on environmental health and community design solutions in urban and rural development in New England and the Gulf of Maine ecosystem.

Bauman Family Foundation. The Bauman Family Foundation, headquartered in Washington, D.C., has approximately \$60 million in assets and makes approximately \$4 million per year in grants throughout the United States. The foundation's central focus is on the connections between environment and health that stem from toxic chemicals and air pollution. The foundation is forging a more explicit link between public health and the smart growth and livable communities agenda, by supporting organizations that impact points of linkage between these agendas, for example, transportation, school siting, and housing.

Like the Liberty Hill Foundation, the Bauman Family Foundation has long supported the Bus Riders Union in Los Angeles and its efforts to connect urban planning, transportation planning, environmental and public health. Another grantee, the Center for Health, Environment and Justice, focuses on schools and children's environmental health through its "Childproofing our Communities" campaign, as does the Healthy Schools Network. Although not specifically listed under the rubric of "smart growth," the foundation sees its major support of the Health and Environment program of the Natural Resources Defense Council, especially its campaign against diesel buses, as a fundamental part of its linkage grantmaking.

Funders' Network Member Foundations Lead the Field. Several other Funders' Network members, including: the New York Community Trust, the Ford Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the James Irvine Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Field Foundation of Illinois, the San Francisco Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta, the McKnight Foundation, LISC, the Tides Foundation, the Surdna Foundation, the Woods Fund of Chicago, the William Penn Foundation, and others, are actively engaged in working through their initiatives and grantees to develop this new area of the smart growth agenda, and to effectively make the public health/smart growth connection.

Resources. Additional information for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is available on its website at www.rwjf.org or by contacting Katherine Kraft, Senior Program Officer, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, P.O. Box 2316, College Road East and Route 1, Princeton, NJ 08543-2316, tel: (609) 627-5960, e-mail: kkraft@rwjf.org. Additional information for the Liberty Hill Foundation is available on its website at www.libertyhill.org or by contacting Michele Prichard, Director of Special Projects, Liberty Hill Foundation, 2121 Cloverfield Boulevard, Suite 113, Santa Monica, CA 90404, tel: (310) 453-3611, ext.104, e-mail: mprichard@libertyhill.org. Additional information for the Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust is available on its website at www.agmconnect.org/cox.html or by contacting Rachel Pohl,

Associate Director, Donor Services Office, Hemenway & Barnes, 60 State Street, Boston, MA 02109-1899, tel: (617) 557-9776, fax: (617) 227-0781, e-mail: rpohl@hembar.com. Additional information for the Bauman Family Foundation is available by contacting Patricia Bauman, Co-Director, Bauman Family Foundation, 2040 S. Street, NW, Washington, DC 20009, tel: (202) 234-8547, e-mail: baumanp@rtk.net.

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