



Rethinking designs for healthy urban communities
Workshop looks at escaping self-made boxes of "no-walk" neighborhoods
by David Abbott - Sonoma West Staff Writer
Wednesday, November 7, 2007 4:27 PM PST

With the exception of a few hearty souls who braved the narrow, traffic-jammed roads leading to Rohnert Park, more than 200 local health leaders, planning officials, and smart growth advocates drove into the parking mess at the Doubletree Inn last Friday for the "Healthy by Design: Planning for Healthy Communities" symposium in search of solutions for the problems associated with the County's growth.

The Nov. 2 conference presented an opportunity to explore solutions to problems that expanding communities - such as Forestville and Sebastopol - face, including critical health issues such as asthma, obesity, and the ongoing healthcare crisis.

The conference was a joint project of the Sonoma County Department of Health Services and the Leadership Institute for Ecology and the Economy featuring a series of speakers addressing the connections between public health and urban planning. Speakers included Dr. Richard Jackson who is a professor of Environmental Health at UC Berkeley, and nationally recognized expert on environmental health, as well as Sonoma County's Public Health Officer Dr. Mary Maddux-Gonzalez, and planning expert Matt Raimi whose firm Raimi and Associates specializes in urban designs that address modern health concerns.

Jackson believes that the redesign of America for the automobile since the end of WWII has led to an urban nightmare for pedestrians.

"We have created 'no walk' communities," he said. "We live in a box, and get in a box to go places."

The first part of his talk focused on the costs to our society associated with the epidemic of obesity in the U.S. He outlined many increased costs, from ambulances and gurneys sturdy enough to accommodate the bigger loads that Americans have become, to \$10 billion in annual farm subsidies for the production of commodities such as corn and soybeans.

"I did a study on the increase in jet fuel costs due to the obesity epidemic and it's costing us more than \$1 billion a year," Jackson said. The study earned him a mention on late-night television when Jay Leno quipped "Now I know why they don't feed us on airplanes anymore."

According to Jackson, only five percent of the GDP went into health care in 1960, but that rose to 14.9 percent in 2006. A major cause has been the increase in chronic diseases, including those related to obesity, and he doesn't think we can turn things around in the face of "poor urban planning and failed leadership."

Jackson pointed out that the worst traffic jams tend to be around schools, and that in 1974 66 percent of children walked or biked to school. That number dropped to 13 percent in 2000. School size has grown in that time, from 127 students to 653 per school. He thinks that creating safe routes to schools and building smaller neighborhood schools will have the dual effect of improving children's health and education, "Kids need to walk to school. It's a crime to take their legs away from them," he said. "We need to design neighborhoods that encourage the continuing development of the child."

Jackson also thinks that if we walk 10,000 steps a day - a goal that can be accomplished through thoughtful urban design - the problems associated with obesity, high blood pressure, and depression can be reduced.

Among the solutions he proposed are to rethink the American diet and demonize bad food. He called farmer's markets "a public health issue," and thinks that every city should have a ring of agriculture around it that could supply at least a portion of its food, and to help reduce CO2.

"It's been proven that green contact is good for us," Jackson said. "Have you ever seen pictures of people at farmer's markets? They're happy. That counters depression."

Maddux-Gonzalez echoed many of Jackson's concerns and cited falling physical activity levels in kids that can lead to problems later in life. Citing local health survey data, she reported that "over half of Sonoma County adults are currently overweight or obese and roughly one in five are not participating in any physical activity." She noted that one-quarter of Sonoma County adults have a chronic condition that could be improved by increasing physical activity.

Raimi brought his experience as an urban planner who wishes to create "partnerships" between planners and public health officials. He showed aerial pictures and city plans to illustrate the lack of access from urban housing developments to the "green spaces" - mostly small parks - and stressed the need for parks "and access."

He also believes that updates to general plans should become "constitutions" for future development.

"Health should be an overarching theme in the business plan," he concluded.