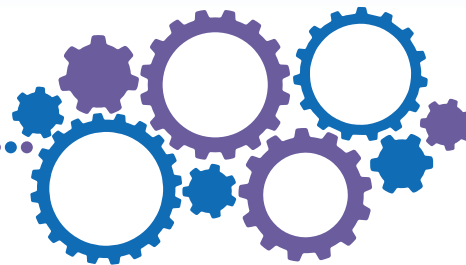


# Partnering for Success: Merced County Includes Health in Planning Projects



## OVERVIEW

The Merced County Department of Public Health (MCDPH) has a long-term commitment to working on local policies that support healthy communities, and has become an active partner in planning, transportation, and land use policy development processes at the city, county and regional levels. MCDPH has engaged with many stakeholders - including the City and County of Merced, school districts, and community groups - to work together to incorporate public health strategies into a variety of local policies. By approaching their partners as a resource to help them achieve their goals, and by emphasizing the vision they share for healthy, sustainable communities, they have achieved the following:

- New zoning code update included supportive language for bicycle parking, a new tobacco buffer zone and easier permitting and sales process for community gardening;
- Successful community outreach resulted in an Active Transportation Program grant for sidewalks in the Winton community;
- Amendment to the Regional Transportation Plan with policies and goal statements that supported compact growth, alternative transportation and more money for safe routes to school and sidewalks; and,
- Increased public participation and inclusion of data in multiple planning processes, particularly in underserved communities.

**“We learned from our first safe routes to school grant that in order to be successful, we need to reach out to partners outside of the health department.”**

*- Stephanie Nathan, Program Manager, Merced County Department of Public Health*

## HIGHLIGHTED PROJECTS

MCDPH is committed to reducing chronic disease in the county and its cities through local policies that support healthy communities. Collaborative projects between MCDPH and planners to influence community, city, county and regional plans and policies include the following:

**Safe Routes to School:** In 2013, MCDPH and the County Planning and Public Works Departments, the school district, the community planning committee, and community organizations conducted outreach activities to gain insight from residents on their vision for a healthier community, with a focus on what could be done to improve active transportation. Outreach included two bike and pedestrian audits, and a parent survey. The parent survey, with 846 responses, addressed barriers to walking and biking to school, listing violence and crime, lack of safe crossings, and traffic speed as the top challenges. The County Public Works Department and MCDPH used community identified infrastructure needs from the walk and bike workshops and surveys to successfully apply for a Caltrans Active Transportation Grant to improve roads and sidewalks near schools. Recently the Department conducted a second community survey focused on identifying community improvements to improve health. Survey results demonstrate that improved parks, sidewalks and crosswalks rated high among community members as priorities. A park workshop led by the Local Government Commission was completed in 2015 as well, leading to the development of a park plan which incorporated community input.

**The City of Merced Active Transportation Plan (ATP) Safe Routes to School Active Transportation Program Grant:** MCDPH is providing two types of assistance in the planning process:

**Outreach:** MCDPH is helping with community outreach and information gathering for the plan development. It held a preliminary community outreach meeting, and worked with the Local Government Commission to host three walk audits and one bike audit at schools in traditionally underrepresented communities. In addition, MCDPH put a survey in Merced City School District back-to-school orientation packets so the community could identify barriers to walking and biking to school. The resulting input will inform policy recommendations for the AT/SRTS Plan.

**Accident Data:** Inspired by the Vision Zero movement to end traffic-related pedestrian and bike injuries and deaths

by 2050, the City asked MCDPH to analyze bike and pedestrian accident data, including police reports, to determine location, cause, and to identify hot spots. This data will be used to prioritize infrastructure improvements.

**Regional Transportation Plan:** MCDPH staff participated in the Regional Transportation Plan/Alternative Planning Strategy steering committee that developed policy recommendations to the Merced County Association of Governments Governing Board. The steering committee recommended amending the existing Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) with the addition of policies and goal statements supporting compact growth, alternative transportation and the allocation of more money for safe routes to school and sidewalks. The RTP amendment, including the new policies, was adopted May 2016.

**Zoning Code Update:** The zoning code consists of the laws or ordinances that implement the City's general plan goals and policies. Since 2012, the City of Merced has been working to update its 50 year-old code. MCDPH participated in the update process and recommended three specific public health-related policies that were incorporated into the zoning ordinance, which was adopted in September 2016:

**1. Bike Parking Recommendations:** MCDPH partnered with the City, the Merced Bicycle Coalition, and ChangeLab Solutions to review and strengthen a bike parking ordinance based on the 2013 City of Merced Bicycle Transportation Plan, with the goal of promoting bicycling.

**2. School Tobacco Buffer Zone:** MCDPH presented a proposal to include a 1,000-foot tobacco buffer zone to restrict new businesses selling tobacco around parks, schools and other child-oriented land uses in the zoning code. MCDPH worked with the Boys and Girls Club of Merced to conduct an audit of retailers near schools that were advertising tobacco products to provide to the City.

**3. Community Gardens:** Community gardens were not included in the previous Merced zoning code. MCDPH worked with the Community Nutrition Action Partnership and Merced Local Food Project to recommend community gardens be included, to allow for sales of community garden produce on site, and to lower the price of the required permit. The City Council went further, directing staff to implement a reduced or no-cost fee for community gardens.

**“Planners and Public Health Professionals have always been working toward the same results...well-designed, livable communities that encourage their residents to adopt healthy lifestyles. We may speak different “languages” and use different terminology, but our goals are pretty much the same.”**

*- Kim Espinosa, Planning Manager,  
City of Merced*

## CHALLENGES

Planners and public health professionals can have goals or outcome requirements that can appear to conflict. For example, public health believes that community gardens are a great strategy to increase access to and information about affordable, healthy food. Planners are concerned about the impact of sales in residential areas, complaints from neighbors, and the need for public input into plans within their neighborhoods. The tobacco buffer to protect children is important to public health, but the City has to consider the impact on merchants of limiting tobacco sales.

Turnover of City and County Planning Department staff can make it challenging to collaborate. New, trusting relationships must be developed and new staff need to be educated about the connections between health and planning. Often joint projects are put on hold during the hiring and training process, which can impact funding that is grant-related and time sensitive. Lengthy planning processes do not necessarily result in short term implementation, which can be frustrating to new partners and the community.

## LESSONS LEARNED

MCDPH has learned the importance of always looking for new opportunities to collaborate with community partners. For example, MCDPH staff reached out to a community clinic's resident group to participate in the development of the active transportation plan. Department staff has also learned to approach potential partners from the position of being a resource to help them achieve the partner's goals. MCDPH has become more involved in community-led activities that promote planning for healthy communities, such as participating in the City of Merced Planning Commission and Bicycle Advisory Commission. Focusing on required projects, such as the General Plan and the Regional Transportation Plan - or plans that a municipality is already undertaking, such as bicycle or pedestrian plan and community plans, also make it easier for planners to collaborate. Both public health and planners strive to engage as much of the community as they can, so being able to tap into one another's networks helps each sector reach their objectives. MCDPH sees this as a way to build sustainability into the continued development and implementation of healthy community policies.

## SUSTAINING SUCCESS

MCDPH has become an active partner in planning, transportation, and land use policy development processes at the city, county and regional levels. For Merced, the next step is to find additional ways to collaborate with the City and County Planning Departments. This includes involving planner and public works staff in MCDPH projects, and institutionalizing regular communication so that new opportunities for collaboration can continue to be identified. In addition, as MCDPH has recognized that the adoption of planning policy is a long term process that can involve years of effort, it is important to sustain commitment from the community.



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