

# PLANNING FOR HEALTHY AND SUSTAINABLE CITIES: NATIONAL CITY OFFERS A MODEL

When the California Strategic Growth Council and Department of Housing and Community Development announced in early 2015 that \$120 million was available in Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities grant funds, staff at many local agencies were excited about the opportunity. After several rounds of applications, only two cities were awarded a grant as the lead applicant; the rest of the funds went to nonprofit organizations and housing developers. National City (pop. 59,381), located 5 miles south of downtown San Diego, received \$9.2 million for its Paradise Creek Affordable Housing Project, an infill transit-oriented development that will add more than 200 affordable housing units to the city's Old Town area.



***The Paradise Creek Affordable Housing Project in National City, a transit-oriented infill development, secured a \$9.2 million grant.***

## Cap-and-Trade Opportunities for Disadvantaged Communities

National City and West Sacramento, the other lead city to be awarded a grant (\$6.5 million), are both considered disadvantaged communities: low-income areas that are disproportionately affected by environmental pollution and other hazards that can negatively affect public health. Of the 2015 Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities grants, 75 percent went to disadvantaged communities.

California's ambitious targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 provide additional opportunities for addressing health in the planning process. The state's Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund, funded by cap-and-trade auction revenue, specifically targets investment in disadvantaged communities. State law (Chapter 830, Statutes of 2012) requires that 25 percent of the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund go to projects that provide a benefit to disadvantaged communities, with a minimum of 10 percent of the funds for projects located within those communities.

### Connecting the Dots Between Land Uses and Health Issues

In recent years, city planners, public health officials and community leaders have focused on how a community's design can have a strong connection to health, quality of life and economic opportunity. Pollutants from transportation and certain types of facilities — such as industrial, port and military base uses in National City's case — can significantly affect air and water quality. These conditions can impact a community's quality of life by increasing rates of obesity, diabetes, asthma and other serious health conditions. Economic impacts include the cost of health care, loss of worker productivity and reduced opportunities for economic investment and community development.

According to the San Diego County Department of Environmental Health, National City is currently home to 32 million pounds of hazardous substances and 870,000 cubic feet of toxic or hazardous gases. The city's 2010 asthma hospitalization rates for children ages 17 and under were nearly 50 percent higher than the rates for San Diego County. Carolina Martinez, a senior planner and policy advocate with the community-based nonprofit Environmental Health Coalition, says residents were increasingly concerned about air quality, exposure to hazardous materials from the industrial uses (including auto repair and body shops) next to their homes, noise, parking issues and traffic. Consequently it was easy for them to make the connection between land uses and the growing number of health problems in their community.

### Planning for Health in National City

National City offers a model for using a comprehensive planning approach to address community environmental and health concerns. In 2006 the city worked with the Old Town neighborhood to prepare the Westside Specific Plan, which calls for reducing incompatible land uses over time and remediating vacant land that was previously unusable due to high levels of pollution. The plan features public transit, a public park and biking and walking paths and includes the Paradise Creek Affordable Housing Project. These design elements also reduce greenhouse gas emissions, making this project eligible for grants from the state's Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund.

Martinez says, "With better access to public transit and biking and walking paths, residents have transportation options that could improve air quality and accessibility to jobs and other crucial destinations."



***A young National City resident plays hopscotch next to a stand of fresh produce.***

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The industrial uses in the Old Town area were not the only land-use based health challenges in National City, according to Raymond Pe, the city's principal planner. The city is home to one of the Port of San Diego's marine terminals and sits at the intersection of three interstate highways, which make air quality a communitywide issue. In 2012 the city approved a Comprehensive Land Use Update, which included a General Plan Update, a Climate Action Plan and an update of the city's zoning code. The city emphasized its commitment to healthy neighborhood planning by including a Health and Environmental Justice Element in its General Plan, becoming the first city in California to adopt an element focusing on health equity. National City is one of many California cities that recognize the important intersection between health equity and climate change.

The consultant who worked on National City's Comprehensive General Plan Update notes that cities don't have to start from scratch; many communities already incorporate policies in their General Plan and other planning documents that, if implemented correctly, can make neighborhoods healthier, more vibrant places.

"Health and safety are the cornerstones of any community, so there are many reasons they should serve as guiding principles for any comprehensive planning effort," says Brad Raulston, National City's executive director of community development and planning. "National City plans to lead by example as we build a sustainable, safe and healthy community."

### Trends in Grant Funding: Engaging the Community

The planning process can seem removed from the daily lives of community members. Getting the public interested in participating in a sometimes lengthy process is challenging. But as the broad economic impacts of land-use planning have become more apparent, local officials and staff find it increasingly important to engage the community. Residents are beginning to understand that the planning process shapes their neighborhoods and affects their personal well-being. Partnerships with the public health sector can engage new constituencies and make planning more relevant to community members. An engaged public helps identify community priorities and makes it easier to gain support for plan implementation.

Requiring broad public engagement and cross-sector collaboration is a current trend in grant funding. Identifying the intersection of land-use planning, public health concerns and greenhouse gas emissions reduction priorities and then combining them with community goals creates opportunities for communities to address current challenges and thrive. For tips on how to engage your community and plan inclusive engagement processes, visit [www.ca-ilg.org/engagement](http://www.ca-ilg.org/engagement).

### National City Earns Beacon Program Recognition

To further demonstrate its commitment to creating a sustainable community, National City joined the Beacon Program in 2015 and was recognized for implementing sustainability best practices. The Beacon Program provides support and recognition to California cities and counties that are working to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, save energy and adopt policies and programs that promote sustainability. The Institute for Local Government and the Statewide Energy Efficiency Collaborative sponsor the Beacon Program. For more information, visit [www.ca-ilg.org/beacon-program](http://www.ca-ilg.org/beacon-program).

### Additional Information

#### **More About Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities Funding**

The California Strategic Growth Council and the Department of Housing and Community Development received 147 concept applications requesting over \$760 million during the first round of Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities grant funding in 2015. Fifty-four applicants were invited to submit a full proposal, and 28 received funding. The next round of awardees will be announced in summer 2016.

[www.sgc.ca.gov/s\\_ahscprogram.php](http://www.sgc.ca.gov/s_ahscprogram.php)

#### **Related Resources From the Institute for Local Government**

For more information on cap and trade, visit ILG's resource center at [www.ca-ilg.org/cap-and-trade-resource-center](http://www.ca-ilg.org/cap-and-trade-resource-center).

For more information on Healthy Neighborhoods, visit [www.ca-ilg.org/healthy-neighborhoods](http://www.ca-ilg.org/healthy-neighborhoods).

**Institute for Local Government Participates in Plan4Health Grant Project** Effectively addressing health impacts requires collaboration and community engagement. The Institute for Local Government is part of a collaborative team of planners, developers, health providers and active living advocacy groups that received a grant from Plan4Health, an initiative of the American Planning Association and the American Public Health Association. The goal is to strengthen the understanding of the connection between the built environment and health in the areas of physical activity and access to healthy foods. ILG is working with local officials in the Sacramento region to identify opportunities in existing planning processes to implement healthy neighborhood policies. [www.plan4health.us/focus-areas](http://www.plan4health.us/focus-areas)

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