



# POLICY BRIEF

THE EDMUND G. "PAT" BROWN INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

MAY 2008 / ISSUE BRIEF No. 2

## YOU ARE HERE: LIVABLE COMMUNITIES AND THE NEW CALIFORNIA DREAM

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**"Livable is an evolving term that has come to mean many things now considered necessities by all communities: aesthetically pleasing; ecologically sustainable; transit and pedestrian friendly; and accessible to schools, jobs, and health care."**

The Public Policy Education Program is supported by a grant from the James Irvine Foundation Expanding Opportunity for the People of California.

Imagine you are starring in the following scenario as a day in the life of a resident somewhere in California. You wake up in your house some distance from where you work, but it's the best location you can afford. You prepare to go to a decent-paying job that you're frankly lucky enough to have. You buckle up in your car and brace yourself for a rush-hour commute. Before getting on the freeway or hitting a main street, you stop to gas up, something you hate to do since gas prices reached record highs of \$4-plus a gallon in the last several months. You drop off your school-age son or daughter at a campus some distance from where you live because your neighborhood school simply is not adequate, and it hasn't been for a while. On the road, sitting in traffic that ranges from stop-and-go gridlock, you make a mental note to stop at the grocery store after work, even though it will take you out of your way—that's more gas you would rather not use—but you really have no choice because your own neighborhood has plenty of convenience stores and fast food, but no supermarkets.

It's official: Throughout California, too many communities are less livable than simply tolerable. Car-driven suburban growth, synonymous with the American dream and most closely identified with California, has collapsed under the strain of financial, environmental, and other costs. Urban cores of Los Angeles and other cities have paid a price, too, eroding for many years as the suburbs have grown; though planners are refocusing now on urban centers as communities of the future, the damage wrought by inner-city neglect is too great and longstanding to turn around any time soon. Add

to that the fact that the national economy is teetering, California is grappling with yet another budget crisis, historically-high income gaps exist between rich and poor, and the middle class (traditionally a buffer between the two that has sustained suburbia) is shrinking steadily. Against this backdrop, achieving "livable communities," sensible a phrase as that sounds, looks impossible. What's a state to do?

The good news is that it can do plenty. Livable is an evolving term that has come to mean many things now considered necessities by all communities: aesthetically pleasing; ecologically sustainable; transit and pedestrian friendly; and accessible to schools, jobs, and health care. Livable communities feature common open space, such as parks, town squares, and economic development in concert with local culture and arts. Much of this is happening throughout the state, albeit on a small scale, in locales from Santa Rosa to San Diego. Communities as disparate as Redlands and East L.A. have been lauded as examples of stagnant or hard-luck places that turned themselves around, even making themselves points of destination. The challenge, of course, is institutionalizing models and ideas that work. Though a notion still in flux, successful livable communities maintain the hallmark of partnership—the involvement of civic groups, nonprofits, universities, and others who are not developers or government officials, but serious community stakeholders. The trend in livability is basically to broaden the creative team, says Robert McNulty, president of Partners for Livable Communities, which means "not relying on chambers of commerce or conventions and visitors bureaus."<sup>1</sup>

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Alongside the optimism and sense of possibility is a very real anxiety Californians feel about their quality of life in the future. The Southern California Association of Governments says that in the next 25 years, the state will add about six million more people, most of them Latino and Asian immigrants. Housing demands will rise, putting more pressure on already-stressed desert and mountain environments; to put things into an even graver larger picture, “fiscal inequity exists between communities, there is an affordable housing crisis, and water supplies as shrinking just as our needs are growing,” the SCAG report goes on to say.<sup>2</sup> The Public Policy Institute of California conducted a 2006 survey, “California’s Future in Your Hands,” that found, among other things, the state is not likely to have enough college-educated people to meet the needs of a future economy.<sup>3</sup> Investment in transportation has lagged behind population growth; three quarters of Californians believe traffic will get worse—hard to imagine—in the next 20 years. Worse yet, Californians have decreasing confidence that government can or will solve the problems: Only 12% believe that it can plan for the future, which is a historic low. It’s somewhat ironic that in the same year as the survey, 2006, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger took some notable and unprecedented steps toward improving California’s livability with his massive, voter-approved infrastructure bond measure and the passage of the Global Warming Solutions Act, the first comprehensive legislation in the nation to call for caps on greenhouse gas emissions.

Encouraging as these actions may be, they are only a start. PPIC calls the infrastructure bonds a “down payment” for everything else California needs to be livable<sup>4</sup>, needs that include equalizing public education so that the largest group of future workers, Latinos, will be prepared. Suffice it to say that there’s not exactly a bond measure in the works to address that.

Yet California holds much promise because for all its divisions, the state is full of towns and cities that could easily adopt “new urbanism” models—essentially small-town growth patterns in urban settings. Within the Los Angeles megalopolis are many small cities and contained neighborhoods—Culver City, Hollywood, Pasadena, and Westwood—that are undergoing revivals and experiencing a new brand of livability; many feature refurbished downtowns and main streets. Of course, the big difference between those places and so many other, “unlivable” places in L.A. and elsewhere is resources and money. Poor communities struggle much harder just to maintain basics such as safe schools and trimmed trees; “livability” is often relative. Yet it shouldn’t be.

One of the more exciting possibilities of livable communities is how they could help integrate (or reintegrate) black, brown, and white; rich, middle class, and poor—groups who have been traditionally segregated into cities and suburbs. One way to achieve that is through inclusionary housing, agreements in which developers of new housing set aside a certain percentage of their stock for affordable housing. California has recently led the way in expanding inclusionary housing. A report by the National Housing Conference in 2004, titled “Inclusionary Zoning: The California Experience,” details how the state increased IH mandates from 64 to 107 communities between 1994 and 2003, with many more under consideration<sup>5</sup> (Los Angeles has been seriously considering a mandate for years, but has not passed one yet). Requiring developers, rather than the state or federal government, to provide affordable housing certainly qualifies as another creative way expand the pool of community stakeholders and fuel the growth of livable communities.

It has taken awhile to realize it, but health and health care are indicators of livability that affect people across community and demographic lines. The closure or downsizing of so many public and private emergency rooms, trauma centers, and full-service hospitals in the last decade has served as a sobering wake-up call to that fact. There is also increasing evidence that pollutants from cars, trucks, ports, and plants are putting everyone’s health at risk, not simply lower-income folk who tend to live closest to freeways and other pollution – hotspots. The encouraging news is that cities in California are trying to get ahead of the curve by incorporating public health issues into their general plans—that is, deciding land use based partly on how that use will affect public health. This is an old idea given new currency by the alarming rise in the last 20 years of chronic diseases, such as asthma and diabetes, and disease-aggravating conditions such as obesity.

Of course, much of the health problem directly relates to the long dominance of the car as a driving force in planning and development: the Public Health Law Program, a program of the Public Health Institute in Oakland, cites vehicle traffic and lack of residential street connectivity as primary obstacles to modern livability. The proliferation of “food deserts”—neighborhoods with lots of fast food and liquor stores, but almost no fresh food—is also a factor. Lack of public gathering spaces such as parks and other kinds of commons, the program says, weakens the social fabric and may even contribute to problems of mental health.<sup>6</sup>

To counter all this, cities and counties are writing health language and using public health arguments in their general and master plans. Marin County, adopting terms such as “built environment,” calls for locating jobs and housing near transit and increased consumption of local food; Watsonville stresses access to healthy food and physical activity. Other cities using health language to write blueprints for a better future include Chula Vista, Benecia, Chino, and Richmond.

What’s going on in these individual places is laudable. But at the state level, nothing will happen without political will—agreement between parties that some issues are too critical and far-reaching not to tackle together. The sticking point, of course, is always money. At a PBI forum on livable communities in April, Assemblyman Warren Furutani admitted that what gets funded and how much is still a partisan-driven phenomenon in the legislature; as an example, he described a recent Democratic attempt to try and close a tax loophole in the sale of high-ticket items such as yachts and planes that was staunchly opposed by Republicans. Yet each new political moment brings new hope of change, even moments of anxiety and loss—moments like now. The PPIC survey says creating and sustaining livability is all about California’s willingness to change what it has become used to, such as trading big single-family homes and long commutes for smaller places that are closer to work, shopping, and public transportation. What it has also grown used to is inequality—of resources, of services, of outcomes. But more and more, that conventional wisdom is being challenged by the pressing reality that we must all invest in livability that is not just about our particular community, but a statewide collective with a shared destiny. “In this budget crisis is a kind of crazy opportunity,” Furutani said at a PBI forum held earlier this year. “Now we can have a dialogue about what kind of California we want, and what kind we want to pay for.”

## CONCLUSIONS

Livable communities need many elements to thrive, but they first need involvement and consensus from many different groups—government, private sector, educational institutions, health professionals, and, of course, the public. Priorities and balances of power must necessarily change for that consensus to happen and for communities to change. With this in mind, here are some suggestions for making livable community less of a pipedream and more about cultural shifts that are more practical and less daunting than they might seem:

- Agencies (e.g., planning and development), public health departments, and housing departments need to work in tandem to ensure communities are green, safe, and healthy environments.
- People running for state office and elected officials need to focus on how the state can provide incentives to local governments to create livable communities.
- Cities can adopt homebuyer programs for talented teachers and other public sector professionals to encourage them to live in the communities where they work. This would improve local schools and services and cut down on transportation congestion at the same time.
- Increase investment in transportation so that it’s proportionate with the population growth.
- Increase investment in education now, especially for low-income students and students of color, so that California will have the large skilled workforce it needs for the future.
- Create nonpartisan space (not a voting booth) for people to regularly come together and focus on policy—i.e., town hall meetings and assemblies. This would encourage more civic engagement and increase and diversify voter turnout at the polls.
- More cities should mandate inclusionary housing, which will help diversify communities economically and ethnically, as well as reduce transportation problems.

The most intimidating thing about successful livable communities is also the most hopeful: so many elements are required to make them work, everyone can—and must—have a role to play.

<sup>1</sup>El Nassar, Haya. (Apr. 11, 2004) “Most Livable? Depends On Your Definition,” *USA Today*.

<sup>2</sup><http://www.scag.ca.gov/livable/gvision/htm>

<sup>3</sup>*California’s Future in Your Hands* (2006) Survey by Public Policy Institute of California, pp. 7-22.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid*, p. 5

<sup>5</sup>*Inclusionary Zoning: The California Experience* (Feb. 2004) National Housing Conference Affordable Housing Policy Review, Vol. 3, Issue 1, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup>Feldstein, Laurison and Wooten. *Cross-Cultural Communication: How Public Health Professionals Are Changing the Landscape of Planning in California*. Public Health Law Program, a program of the Public Health Institute, Oakland. pp. 3-4.