



Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative

Alameda County | City of Berkeley | Contra Costa County | Marin County | City and County of San Francisco | San Mateo County | Santa Clara County | Solano County

June 25, 2008

Metropolitan Transportation Commission
101 Eighth Street
Oakland, CA 94607

Dear Commissioners:

We know that, after many months of research, planning and discussion, you are preparing to make investment decisions based on the Regional Transportation Plan (RTP). As public health officials from eight bay area jurisdictions, we have a keen interest in those decisions and hope you will take our comments into consideration.

As you know, there has been a renaissance of interest in the relationship of public health to the built environment. Roughly 90% of preventable illness and death is now associated with chronic diseases and injuries, many of which have their roots in our physical environment. One-third of our kids are overweight, which makes them prime candidates to join the two-thirds of adults who are overweight and obese, and at risk for diabetes, heart disease, stroke and other chronic conditions. An article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, for example, projected that, unless we do something differently, one out of three babies born in the year 2000 can expect to develop diabetes at some point in their lifetimes. More generally, this could be the first generation in over a century that can expect to live shorter lives than their parents. As important as they are, the stakes are greater than better access to health care or smarter choices about what we eat. Much of what shapes our health today is the result of the physical and social conditions in which we live, so public health is increasingly focused on how we can improve those living conditions.

Although we are still relative novices in transportation planning, there are some elements in the RTP that strike us as being particularly important for supporting good community health. We therefore urge you to include them in your priorities for investment.

- **Safe routes to schools.** If we are ever able to reverse the health-threatening weight gain in children, we must figure out how to get physical activity back into their day-to-day lives. If kids once again walk or ride bikes to school, that will be an important contribution. The creation of grant programs to fund projects that promote children walking and biking to school would be a great boost to this public health campaign.
- **Safe routes to transit.** The more we can encourage everyone, not just kids, to walk and bike, the better off we will all be. Making it easier and safer to bike or walk to transit stations and stops will expand the

universe of people who have incorporated physical activity back into their daily lives. We know that you currently invest in safe routes to transit, but we also understand that it is oversubscribed. Any additional investments will be a great asset in our efforts to improve community health.

- **Prioritize transportation needs in low-income communities.** As we documented in our report, *Health Inequities in the Bay Area* (www.barhii.org), the neighborhood where people live can mean a decade or more difference in life expectancy compared with living in another neighborhood. It is important that we focus our investments in those low-income communities where a multitude of factors combine to create comparatively poor health status. Making transportation widely available and affordable would be an important contribution to improving those neighborhood conditions associated with poor health.
- **Prioritize projects that improve air quality.** Asthma hospitalization rates in neighborhoods like West Oakland, Bayview/Hunters Point and Richmond are much greater than those for other bay area communities. Recent studies by the California Air Resources Board have documented higher rates of respiratory illness and certain cancers associated with exposures to particulate matter. It is essential that transportation policies help reduce the burden of air pollution in those communities with high exposures and related illnesses.
- **Transit oriented development.** We support your efforts to use transportation investments to encourage smarter land use decisions through transit oriented development projects. While we are sometimes accused of dreaming that we can reverse over a half century of urban planning as a major factor in contemporary patterns of disease, it is through innovative approaches like transit oriented development that we see hope that it is indeed possible. We encourage you to continue supporting those projects in your investment priorities.
- **Climate change.** The specter looming over all of us is climate change. It is essential not only for our health, but for our survival, that we do whatever we can to reduce dependency on the automobile and promote public transportation, biking and walking. You are in a unique position to contribute to that Herculean task. We stand ready to help you in any way we can to advance that goal.

Thank you for considering our recommendations. As we indicated at the beginning of this letter, transportation planning is new to many of us in public health. However, we realize that it could be more important to improving overall community health than many of the things we do in our clinics and programs. Accordingly, we look forward to working with you as you make your investment decisions, now and in the future.

On behalf of Bay Area public health officials,

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