



November 19, 2013

Mayor Amarpreet Dhaliwal, Chair
Fresno Council of Governments
2035 Tulare Street Suite 201
Fresno, CA 93721

Subject: Public Health Support for Scenario D

Dear Chairman Dhaliwal:

On behalf of the undersigned health and medical and consumer advocacy organizations, we are writing to voice our support for the Fresno Council of Governments (COG) to select Scenario D as the healthiest foundation for its 2014 Sustainable Communities Strategy (SCS) under Senate Bill 375. As COG members consider a variety of scenarios for future growth, it is critical to underscore that these planning decisions are ultimately decisions that affect the health and well-being of Fresno County residents.

The public health community is unified in support of healthier, more sustainable growth patterns for Fresno County to reduce smog, soot and greenhouse gases as well as the chronic illnesses associated with limited transportation choices and automobile dependency. Because of Senate Bill 375 (SB 375), the region's leaders have the opportunity to envision how to achieve this healthier future with communities that are more resilient to climate, economic and other impacts. As you go through this process, we urge you to envision a future beyond historical planning assumptions, beyond meeting the minimum SB 375 requirements and to instead focus on what is needed to dramatically improve the health of Fresno County residents. The Sustainable Community Strategy cannot just be a repeat of existing general plans. This is not what was intended when SB 375 was adopted and has not been the model followed in other regions. This is an opportunity for Fresno County communities to make an important shift in planning efforts to embrace more compact and liveable communities with revitalized downtowns and healthier, more active residents. We urge you to take this opportunity as the final SCS plan is developed over the coming months.

Scenario D provides the greatest opportunity to maximize health benefits and avoid millions in health care costs:

Despite significant efforts made to clean the air, Fresno remains among the five most polluted cities in the United States, with low income communities and communities of color at highest risk for air pollution-related health emergencies. Asthma rates continue to be significantly higher than state and national rates, with pollution episodes contributing to worsening of asthma and elevated numbers of asthma attacks. A strong SCS framework, implemented at the local level, can help to reduce air pollution and related health emergencies. An independent assessment found that Scenario D would provide more than \$106 million in respiratory health benefits to Fresno County residents in 2035¹. We believe that Scenario D, with a well aligned transportation project list and greater investment in pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure and transit operations, especially in underserved communities, can best support further air quality progress in Fresno County.

Scenario D promotes reductions in a range of chronic illnesses: In addition to higher rates of air pollution related impacts, Fresno residents face higher than average rates of health conditions affected by the built environment, including asthma, obesity, diabetes, heart disease and strokes². Fresno County is among the bottom ten counties in California for rates of deaths due to diabetes³. California Department of Public Health research has shown significant reductions in rates of diabetes, cancers, heart disease, depression and dementia can be realized through a shift toward more active transportation options⁴. Scenario D provides the greatest levels of walking, biking and transit and would result in the greatest public health benefits for the county.

Scenario D scores best on community indicators important to healthy communities:

Health-focused planning should envision a future for Fresno with healthier children who have greater access to nutritious food, recreation and safer routes for walking and biking to schools. Scenario D has been estimated to avoid \$74 million in avoided health damages associated with vehicle-pedestrian/bicycle accidents⁵. Healthy growth should plan for more independent senior citizens living in neighborhoods with housing choices that support non-drivers so they can successfully age in place. And healthy planning should help reduce household transportation budgets by fostering more active transportation-focused travel, particularly in neighborhoods underserved by safe walking, biking and transit options. In reviewing the results of the scenarios considered by the COG, Scenario D does the most overall to promote healthy communities and we urge your support of this scenario.

¹ Calthorpe Associates using the *RapidFire* scenario modeling tool, November 2013.

² UCLA School of Health Policy Research, *California Health Interview Survey*, 2013.

³ California Department of Public Health and California Conference of Local Health Officers. *County Health Status Profiles*, April 2013. <http://www.cdph.ca.gov/pubsforms/Pubs/OHIRProfiles2013.pdf>

⁴ Neil Maizlish, James Woodcock, Sean Co, Bart Ostro, Amir Fanai, and David Fairley. *Health CoBenefits and Transportation-Related Reductions in Greenhouse Gas Emissions in the San Francisco Bay Area*. American Journal of Public Health: April 2013, Vol. 103, No. 4, pp. 703-709. Also available online at: http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/CCDPPH/Documents/ITHIM_Technical_Report11-21-11.pdf.

⁵ Calthorpe, 2013.

By contrast, Scenario B performs weakest on many of the performance measures, including walk, bike and transit options, vehicle miles traveled and 2035 greenhouse gas reduction. As presently constructed, Scenario B does the least among the scenarios to foster healthy communities as it focuses investment and growth into more outlying areas. While we are disappointed that committee recommendations have favored Scenario B, we are encouraged by efforts to advance the dialogue between communities to build toward a more unified vision for growth. We are hopeful that this continued dialogue will provide clear goals for evaluating and addressing the needs of current residents in existing communities.

We appreciate the efforts by COG staff and members of the COG and committees to involve the health community in the planning process. Given the awareness of the severe health challenges facing Fresno County residents and the opportunities to improve health by moving beyond current and historical growth patterns, the COG should support Scenario D as the basis for the SCS. Upon choosing a preferred scenario, we urge the COG to evaluate all opportunities to create a visionary Sustainable Communities Strategy that invests in existing communities in order to plan and build compact, walkable communities that do the most to promote health. We also urge the COG to fully evaluate Scenario D within the forthcoming environmental review process.

Thank you for considering our perspectives on the important health benefits of implementing a strong Sustainable Communities Strategy under Senate Bill 375. We look forward to working with you and the COG staff to continue the important work of improving health in Fresno County communities.

Sincerely,

Blanca Castro, Advocacy Manager
AARP

Tim Gibbs, Director of Campaign Initiatives
American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network

Heather Dumais, San Joaquin Valley Advocacy Coordinator
American Lung Association in California

Jonathan Heller, Co-Director
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