



April 23, 2014

Chairman Jeff Laugero and Members of the Board of Directors
San Joaquin Council of Governments
555 East Weber Avenue
Stockton, CA 95202-2804

Dear Chairman Laugero and members of the Board:

On behalf of the undersigned health and medical organizations we write to offer our support and recommendations to further enhance the San Joaquin Council of Governments' (SJCOG) Regional Transportation Plan/Sustainable Communities Strategy (RTP/SCS). As the Board moves toward a vote to adopt a final plan, we provide recommendations to improve air quality and public health, to increase safe, practical and healthier mobility options for children and seniors and to revitalize our existing communities, especially our most disadvantaged communities.

This plan has the potential to move San Joaquin County in a healthy, new direction. Historical sprawl development has had negative impacts on air quality, chronic illnesses, independence for seniors and young people, social equity, household budgets and many other quality of life factors in the county. The American Lung Association in California's March 2014 *Public Health Crossroads* report found that leaving business-as-usual planning behind and using the new growth coming to San Joaquin County to create more walkable, connected communities could avoid \$47 million in traffic pollution-related health impacts, including over 5,000 asthma attacks and 950 lost work days each year by 2035¹.

Cutting transportation emissions is a vital clean air strategy in San Joaquin County, which is home to the nation's 12th most particulate-polluted metropolitan area². But the benefits of healthier planning provide benefits far beyond air quality. Evidence shows that communities where residents can take part in daily physical activity and active transportation often result in significant reductions in air pollution, cancers, diabetes, heart disease, obesity and stroke, as well as billions in associated health care costs^{3 4}. Planning that promotes good health saves

¹ American Lung Association in California. *Public Health Crossroads: San Joaquin County*. March 2014. www.lung.org/california.

² American Lung Association. *State of the Air 2013*. www.stateoftheair.org.

³ Maizlish, N., et al. *Health Cobenefits and Transportation-Related Reductions in Greenhouse Gas Emissions in the San Francisco Bay Area*. American Journal of Public Health. April 2013. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3673232/>

⁴ Hsi-Hwa Hu, et al. *Neighborhood environment and health behavior in Los Angeles area*. Transport Policy. May 2014. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0967070X14000353>

families in medical care costs, prevents pedestrian and bicyclist injury costs, saves businesses in insurance costs and lost productivity (including lost work days among employees home with sick children) and saves school districts money on lost enrollment days^{5 6}.

Our recommendations are geared toward several specific strategies that the COG approved for this plan and we believe that acting on these recommendations will enhance quality of life for all residents:

Promote health by bringing more active transportation projects online in the near term

We strongly support that this plan placed a priority on improving public health, and appreciate the COG's adoption of a strategy to "Enhance Public Health through Active Transportation Projects." The 78 percent increase in active transportation funds in this plan clearly helps to support this strategy, but the gains made in active transportation remain characterized in the plan as "modest" at 0.68 percent increase over the 2011 plan, and actually drop below 2012 levels by 2040 according to the Environmental Impact Report (Table 4.12-3). Given the significant air pollution and chronic disease rates⁷ in San Joaquin County, we recommend that the COG seek to gain more substantial improvements and clearly defined timelines for these projects to be completed in the near term and to sustain increased active transportation in the long-term. Front-loading these investments, and prioritizing investments within potential future transportation funding measures detailed in the plan would better serve the health and mobility options for residents. These types of projects can also provide more opportunities for neighbors and residents to interact in public, creating more of civic engagement that can help to reduce crime and increase safety and security, another strategy outlined in the RTP/SCS.

Prioritize existing communities, downtowns and town centers over suburban development

While the current plan places significant focus on increasing transit service, the land use projections in the plan continue to favor suburban growth that would effectively require residents to drive for all daily errands. Where suburban development will occur, the plan should increase the level (if any) of walkable, mixed-use development to ensure that new developments are not devoid of healthier transportation options to jobs, shopping, schools or other daily needs. Given that the COG has put resources and effort into its inventory of viable Transit Oriented Development/Infill sites, as well as preparing the Smart Growth Incentive Program, more support could be given to infill and existing neighborhoods than is currently outlined in the plan. Given the COG strategy to enhance health through more active transportation programs, and the fact that the share of walking and biking is assumed to drop over time, more of the identified infill sites could be assumed to be developed in

⁵ Maizlish, *ibid*.

⁶ American Lung Association in California, *ibid*.

⁷ San Joaquin Council of Governments. *Staff Report: Basic Public Health Facts*. May 2013.
<http://www.sjcgog.org/AgendaCenter/ViewFile/Agenda/05232013-147>

the current plan and, as future transportation funds become available, the Smart Growth Incentive Program, transit capital, streetscape and active transportation projects should be accelerated for early action to quickly invest in creating safe, vibrant and walkable neighborhoods.

Direct reserve funding to expand existing community transit bus systems

We appreciate that the 2014 plan increases transit funds 28.1 percent over the past plan, and believe that the expansion of the San Joaquin County Regional Transit District's Bus Rapid Transit system is a success story to be highlighted to other jurisdictions. It is clear that the investment in this system needs to be supported with a high level of transit oriented development. We believe that the RTP/SCS can be further aligned with the COG's strategy to "Optimize Public Transportation System to Provide Efficient and Convenient Access for Users at All Income Levels" by re-directing a percentage of the funds being held in reserve for *possible* future commuter rail service out of the county into existing transit bus systems that operate and provide local in-town service needs today. We believe that re-directing some portion of the reserve funding to enhance local bus service for those living and working within the county could also support social equity and trip reduction goals.

Issue progress reports on key measures and strategies presented in the plan and incorporate additional health and equity indicators into future plans

As the COG moves forward with implementation of the plan, it will be important to review progress toward key strategies. While the planning process is a short four-year effort, mid-term progress reporting will help to inform board members and the public on successes and challenges in meeting important benchmarks and regional emission reduction targets. Specifically, the COG could convene the SCS advisory committee annually for updates and discussion of implementation of the SCS strategy outcomes. For example, the committee could evaluate and report on how implementation of the plan is meeting strategies of "Enhancing Public Health through Active Transportation Projects" or "Optimizing Public Transportation System to Provide Efficient and Convenient Access for Users at All Income Levels" in support of the COG's goals. Inclusion of a San Joaquin County Public Health Services representative on the SCS Advisory Committee would provide an opportunity for valuable, ongoing expertise and feedback related to the health impacts of planning decisions as deliberations move forward. In addition, as future plans are developed, COG should continue to review the listing of the health and equity performance indicators developed through a statewide collaboration led by Human Impact Partners, which were not able to be modeled in this initial SCS.

We view the SCS process through the lens that planning decisions have a real impact on the health and vibrancy of our communities and we appreciate your consideration of the above recommendations in this light. We thank you for the important dialogue on the future of San Joaquin County, and look forward to working with you as you consider the final plan.

Sincerely,

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