

March 21, 2012

**Fresno Council of Governments
2035 Tulare St., Suite 201
Fresno, CA 93721**

Re: Promoting Public Health via SB 375 Target-Setting Scenarios

Dear Chair Mayor Dhaliwal and Esteemed Members of the Fresno COG Policy Board:

We write to commend to you on the work that is underway at the COG to implement SB 375. In particular, the creation of the SB 375 Task Force and the hard work of the staff and committee members to create sustainable target-setting scenarios deserve a round of applause. We appreciate their diligent efforts.

Since the passage of SB 375, our organizations have given significant effort and consideration to how California's regional land use and transportation plans can help regions become healthier, more sustainable, and more equitable. We believe that SB 375, if properly implemented, can ensure cleaner air, cleaner water, and reduced rates of obesity, lung disease, asthma, and other chronic illnesses. We also believe it can help address health disparities, make housing and transportation more affordable, and provide better access to jobs and health care, particularly for lower income and disadvantaged households.

In the past year, we have followed the efforts of other regions around the state to develop Sustainable Communities Strategies that advanced public health, equity, and sustainability. We write to share a few of the best practices that we have observed and to offer our help as the SB 375 Task Force and the Policy Board continue their work on the target-setting scenarios.

I. Create target-setting scenarios that promote health, equity, and sustainability

Fresno County is among the fastest growing regions in the state. From 2000-2010, the population in the San Joaquin and Sacramento valleys grew by over 20%, compared to only 14% growth for Southern California and 10% growth in the Bay Area.¹ The California Department of Finance predicts that growth in the San Joaquin Valley will continue to outpace that of the state as a whole. Decisions made now about where and how growth occurs will determine the region's quality of life, economy, public health outcomes, and life expectancies for decades to come.

This growth offers the opportunity to benefit Fresno communities, provide residents with a more robust set of transportation options, make it easier for people to meet their daily needs close to home, bolster struggling local businesses and families, and keep the combined costs of housing and transportation manageable for all households. However, these benefits will only result from careful planning and smart transportation investments.

¹ Source: 2010 California Regional Progress Report: One State, Many Regions, Our Future. Prepared for the California Department of Transportation and the California Strategic Growth Council.

We encourage you to use the Sustainable Communities Strategy to examine a broad range of scenarios about how the region can grow, including some scenarios that make an ambitious effort to take another step beyond the planning already occurring in the cities of Fresno and Clovis, to consider what additional steps would further advance the goals of cleaner air and a more healthy and equitable region. At the time of writing this letter, the Task Force is developing its scenario definitions, and we look forward to seeing a scenario that takes ambitious strides forward.

II. Invite public health experts and community members to the table

Because of the very significant impact that planning and transportation have on public health, transportation agencies and public health officials are working more closely together around the state. One important step is to continue to deepen engagement with local public health officers in the planning process, as well as community members and health and equity advocates who can point to essential gaps in transportation and other infrastructure. Over the past year, a number of the undersigned organizations co-hosted forums in Sacramento, Riverside and Los Angeles to foster dialogue between MPO and local planning staff, local public health officers, local elected leaders, air district representatives and others integral to creating healthier communities. We encourage Fresno COG to work with local partners to convene a similar meeting to broaden local understanding of the impacts of planning on public health and health disparities, and the need for a public health role in planning. In January, the California Department of Public Health and TransForm released a primer – *Creating Healthy Regional Transportation Plans* – that includes many examples of how transportation plans can improve health and equity outcomes.

Examining health impacts may identify some very significant results. For instance, while the Metropolitan Transportation Commission is still developing its final transportation scenario, it partnered with the California Department of Public Health and the Bay Area Air Quality Management District to learn how different transportation outcomes would impact health. They found that an ambitious active transportation scenario that increased the average person's time spent walking and biking to 22 minutes / day would result in 13% fewer deaths, 15% fewer years of life lost for cardiovascular disease, and ultimately “rank among the most notable public health achievements in the modern era, and reduce the estimated \$35 billion annual cost in California from cardiovascular disease and other chronic conditions such as obesity.” The San Diego region is now preparing to work with the California Department of Public Health to use this same health impacts modeling tool. Such partnerships can be particularly helpful in understanding health impacts and in identifying what steps would most ensure that particular groups do not get behind as the region's economic prosperity grows.

III. Measure what matters

Fresno COG should tailor a set of goals and performance measures to guide decision-makers as they consider which Sustainability Communities Strategy scenario will best meet their goals. Over many years of transportation planning work, your COG has developed significant expertise in evaluating the impact of transportation investments. SB 375 is an opportunity to expand these analyses. Regions around the state have been using this chance to expand their efforts, by studying the potential impact on public health outcomes, household and city budgets, and other important policy goals. Many regions have incorporated health-focused performance measures or even targets. For instance, Bay Area agencies set targets to “reduce premature deaths from exposure to fine particulates (PM2.5) by 10%... and achieve greater reductions in highly-impacted areas.”

In support of these efforts, Human Impact Partners worked with public health and planning organizations to create health and equity performance measures (attached) for inclusion in SCS processes. These measures have been endorsed by over 20 organizations recommending that these measures be evaluated and included in SCSes around the state. These could be tailored to better fit the specific issues and circumstances in Fresno County. We encourage you to review your goals if you have not already done so, then identify how to measure the results the scenarios will have on these goals. You might even consider setting targets on particularly important issues. While we understand the Task Force's decision not to include health performance measures in its target-setting scenarios, we encourage you to begin conversations now about how these measures can be included in Sustainable Communities Strategies, and – as part of target-setting – to discuss what *health* and *equity* targets you might achieve through this process.

In particular, in light of the March 2012 report by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies Health Policy Institute that revealed that average life expectancy varies by as much as 21 years between zip codes, we would encourage you to consider how transportation investments and land use planning can not only reduce premature mortality but ameliorate health disparities. The recent report by the Center for Regional Change *Land of Risk, Land of Opportunity* provides a new Cumulative Environmental Vulnerabilities Assessment (CEVA) tool that can help identify those locations and populations that are at greatest risk of cumulative health impacts and that have greater socioeconomic vulnerability. Performance measures could help ensure that the Sustainable Communities Strategy does the most possible to address these risks and reduce health disparities.

Conclusion

Thank you again for your significant work. We look forward to seeing the committee's progress and stand available to offer any support or expertise we can provide to this Task Force or to the Policy Board as you continue forward on this important planning process.

Sincerely,

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