

Strategic Opportunities to Create a Healthy, Equitable Land Use System in Los Angeles



About the HEALU Network: The Healthy, Equitable, Active Land Use Network (HEALU Network) was formed to promote policies and practices in Los Angeles’ land use system that support health and social equity. The HEALU Network represents broad topical expertise—active transportation, parks and open space, affordable housing, environmental law, public health, and more—and varying approaches, from grassroots organizing to community development to strategic policy advocacy, across Los Angeles’ diverse landscape. We are joined by a shared belief that healthy, equitable land use can be intentionally produced through strategic multi-sector action. Together, we are committed to building a healthier, more equitable land use system in Los Angeles.

This brief was prepared by Prevention Institute on behalf of the Healthy, Equitable, Active Land Use Network (HEALU Network) and represents a broad vision for achieving health equity through land use.

For a full list of HEALU Network partners and to learn more please visit www.preventioninstitute.org.



Executive Summary

Background: Los Angeles' low-income communities of color have not received the same level of policy attention, developer investment, and other types of innovation in healthy, equitable land uses that have benefitted higher income neighborhoods. These communities are frequently starved for health-promoting resources and infrastructure—like healthy food, quality parks, and affordable housing—and they are overburdened by concentrations of unhealthy land uses such as liquor stores, hazardous waste storage, and industrial facilities that emit toxic pollution. Moreover, residents of underserved communities are typically not engaged as meaningfully as they should be in land use and development decision-making processes.

These conditions are not exceptional or unique to neighborhoods in Los Angeles; they reflect the systematic production of inequities through historical and current day policies, practices, and procedures throughout the United States. But just as health inequities have been created, there are pathways to produce a healthy, equitable land use system. In such a system, both the tools of the planning field and the processes through which planning is done can increase community access to health-promoting resources while protecting people from hazardous and unsafe land uses. To achieve this in Los Angeles, a systems-fix—not one-off workarounds—is critically needed.

Purpose of this Brief: This document lays out four key strategies to move Los Angeles to a healthier, more equitable land use system, and highlights a selection of policy examples and key opportunities. The strategies outlined in this brief emerged originally from a landscape analysis conducted in advance of the formation of the HEALU Network, and they were expanded and refined by our Network's multi-sector partners.

Four Key Strategies to Create a Healthy, Equitable Land Use System in Los Angeles:

1. Increase the percentage of public funds invested in health-promoting infrastructure in low-income communities of color.
2. Build capacity in government, the private sector, and community-based organizations for robust community engagement in land use planning and policymaking.
3. Accelerate land use innovations and demonstration projects in low-income communities of color, and scale up successful pilot projects to drive policy change.
4. Foster cross-government collaboration to embed health and equity in all land use decisions.

A Vision for the Future: These four strategies will propel us towards a new norm in which economic incentives and political and social support drive strong policy change, and where public and private investments in innovative projects create value, social capital, and economic growth in underserved neighborhoods. Coupled with robust community engagement activities by government agencies and non-profits, the result will be momentous: a healthier and more just, resilient, and prosperous Los Angeles, and a model for other cities nationwide. We are hopeful that organizations and agencies outside of Los Angeles will be inspired by these approaches and build upon them, expanding the movement to build healthier, more equitable land use systems across the United States.

Strategic Opportunities to Create a Healthy, Equitable Land Use System in Los Angeles

A Brief of the Healthy, Equitable, Active Land Use Network (HEALU Network)

The Healthy, Equitable, Active Land Use Network (HEALU Network) was formed to promote policies and practices in Los Angeles' land use system that support health and social equity. We are joined by a shared belief that healthy, equitable land use can be intentionally produced through strategic multi-sector action. The HEALU Network represents broad topical

expertise—active transportation, parks and open space, affordable housing, environmental law, public health, and more—and varying approaches, from grassroots organizing to community development to strategic policy advocacy, across Los Angeles' diverse landscape. Together, we are committed to building a healthier, more equitable land use system in Los Angeles.

Toward a Land Use System that Produces Better Health for All

Land use is the “general location and density of housing, business, industry, open space, public buildings and grounds, waste disposal facilities,” and other facilities within a community.¹ The planning and development sectors are the primary drivers of our land use system, though many other sectors—finance, education, and transportation, for example—also shape how land is used, by whom, and for what purposes. Land use is a critical determinant of health because it shapes communities' access to health-promoting resources like jobs, affordable housing, healthy food, and safe places to play and be physically active. Yet, too often, land use reinforces pervasive, historical health inequities.

Inadequate land use planning and persistent divestment in low-income communities of color correlate with high rates of chronic disease and injury. Los Angeles' low-income communities of color have not received the same level of policy attention, developer investment, and other types of innovation in healthy, equitable land uses that have benefitted higher income neighborhoods. These communities are frequently starved for health-promoting resources and infrastructure—like healthy food, quality parks, and affordable housing—and they are overburdened by concentrations of unhealthy land uses such as liquor stores, hazardous waste storage, and industrial facilities that emit toxic air pollution next to homes, schools, day care facilities, and senior centers.

“Just as health inequities have been created, there are pathways to produce a healthy, equitable land use system.”

These communities lack the kinds of zoning and land use policy tools that have been used to protect more affluent neighborhoods from such problematic land uses, as well as incentives to drive healthy land uses. Moreover, residents of underserved communities are typically not engaged as meaningfully as they should be in land use and development decision-making processes.

These conditions are not exceptional or unique to neighborhoods in Los Angeles; they reflect the systematic production of inequities through historical and current day policies, practices, and procedures throughout the United States. But just as health inequities have been created, there are pathways to produce a healthy, equitable land use system. In such a system, both the tools of the planning field and the processes through which planning is done can increase community access to health-promoting resources while protecting people from hazardous and unsafe land uses. To achieve this in Los Angeles, a systems-fix—not one-off workarounds—is critically needed.

This document lays out four key strategies to move Los Angeles to a healthier, more equitable land use system, and highlights a selection of policy examples and key opportunities. The strategies focus deliberately on policies and projects rather than plans. While general and community plans play an important role in land use decision-making, they are only as good as their timeliness, relevancy, and effective implementation. It is through concrete policies and practices, authentic community engagement, adequately funded projects, and associated norms change that we will bring about much-needed improvements to the land use system.

Defining Health Equity

“Health equity means that every person, regardless of who they are—the color of their skin, their level of education, their gender or sexual identity, whether or not they have a disability, the job that they have, or the neighborhood that they live in—has an equal opportunity to achieve optimal health.”

—Braveman, et al., 2011.

“Achieving health equity requires valuing everyone equally with focused and ongoing societal efforts to address avoidable inequalities, historical and contemporary injustices, and the elimination of health and health care disparities.”

—U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013.

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Strategy 1: Increase the percentage of public funds invested in health-promoting infrastructure in low-income communities of color.

Californians currently invest billions of dollars in infrastructure, whether it is to build our roads, bridges, parks, water systems, or schools. In 2006, the state's then-Governor signed into law a Strategic Growth Plan to “restore and expand our highways, roads, and transit systems as well as our schools, courthouses, ports, levees, and water supply systems.”² Investing in infrastructure that supports each element of the California Strategic Growth Council's *Healthy Community Framework* (see Appendix) with a particular focus on equity can spur economic growth, improve the environment, and ensure health and well-being for future generations.

Highly effective programs like the Statewide Park Development and Community Revitalization Act of 2008 (AB 31 – De Leon) have dedicated bond measure dollars to high-priority projects in high-need communities through specific funding allocations and clear grantmaking requirements. A recent evaluation of this funding program confirms that when equity was clearly defined as a priority, state funds were spent accordingly; when priorities for the bond dollars were more loosely defined, projects were less likely to benefit “disadvantaged communities.”³ Dedicating greater infrastructure investments to health and safety-promoting infrastructure like parks, healthy food retail, walking facilities, and bicycle infrastructure in divested, underserved communities with high rates of preventable chronic illness and injury will result in multiple benefits to California residents including improved health outcomes, reduced health care costs, and best use of our land resources.

Specific opportunities to increase the percentage of public funds invested in health-promoting infrastructure in low-income communities of color include:

- **Clearly define requirements, health and equity-based criteria, and metrics** that would enable state and local government departments, agencies, and special districts to allocate and spend dollars in “high need” or “disadvantaged” communities. For instance, public health leaders developed the [Health Disadvantage Index](#) to complement the CalEnviro Screen tool, which the State of California uses to identify “disadvantaged” communities and prioritize spending of the State's billion-dollar cap-and-trade program revenue in accordance with the California Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006: Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (SB 535 – De Leon).⁴
- **Track public finance measure spending and evaluate its effectiveness.** State and local finance measures should include requirements to track where and how these public dollars are spent. Evaluating publicly-financed infrastructure projects, including measurement of equity outcomes, would demonstrate how equitably such dollars are allocated and shed light on the direction future measures should take to better achieve healthier and more equitable outcomes. Making comprehensive data accessible is key to achieving this strategy.
- **Increase general fund allocations for key agencies and designate resources to address historic inequities in the availability and distribution of health-promoting public infrastructure** including parks and recreational facilities, active transportation, and transit oriented infrastructure, with a particular focus on health and safety “hot spots” in low-income communities. For example, Los Angeles ranks below 50 major U.S. cities in its spending on parks and recreation per

resident which contributes to half of all Angelenos lacking walkable access to a park.⁵ Increasing park investments in underserved communities promotes physical activity among other health, social, and environment benefits for residents. Similarly, LA County Metro dedicates a lower proportion of its transporta-

tion sales tax revenue to active transportation than comparable counties; based on best practices, advocates recommend that Metro dedicate at least 10 percent of sales tax revenue to support walking, biking, and safe routes to school.⁶

Strategy 2: Build capacity in government, the private sector, and community-based organizations for robust community engagement in land use planning and policymaking.

Because of the long-term nature and technical complexity of most land use policy issues, effective community engagement requires intensive time, resources, and commitment. LA's nonprofit sector has a strong legacy using innovative practices—like community benefits agreements, project labor agreements, and conditional use permits—to ensure that large scale developments and problematic land uses do not infringe upon the public's health and safety. But in many cases, land use focused organizing campaigns have arisen in response to a problematic development rather than as part of a long-term, proactive policy agenda. Within City Hall, there are requirements for community participation in a wide range of land use decision-making processes but the outcomes are widely inconsistent, reflecting the lack of mandated best practices and baseline standards. Developers, planners, and community residents can all benefit when residents are organized around the implementation of a vision. Projects are more likely to move forward without a public fight, and plans are more likely to attract outside dollars, when they represent the community's desires, culture, and articulated needs.

Several cities in the Pacific Northwest provide examples of how the City of Los Angeles could strengthen

its commitment to robust, equitable community engagement. In 2008, Seattle's then-Mayor issued an Executive Order on *Inclusive Outreach and Public Engagement* mandating that all City departments adhere to an *Inclusive Outreach and Public Engagement Guide*, developed by the City's Race and Social Justice Initiative. The guide provides all city staff with a comprehensive framework, key principles, strategies, and step-by-step instructions for implementing inclusive public engagement processes.⁷ Similarly, the City of Portland's Public Involvement Advisory Council, comprised of 50% City staff and 50% community members, is dedicated to improving the quality and consistency of the City's public involvement. In 2010, Portland's City Council adopted a set of *Public Involvement Principles* developed by the Public Involvement Advisory Council.⁸ The principles include Partnership, Early Involvement, Building Relationships and Community Capacity, Inclusiveness and Equity, Good Quality Process Design and Implementation, Transparency, and Accountability, and each is tied to outcomes and indicators that the City uses to evaluate the effectiveness of public engagement.⁹ Following these models and leveraging LA's community-based organizational capacity could shift more land use decisions from being done *to* Angelenos to being done *with* and *by* them.

Strategies to build capacity for robust community engagement in land use planning and policymaking include:

- **Target government and philanthropic investments for community-based “anchor” organizations** to build and sustain community engagement in land use processes. Anchor organizations are hubs in their communities; they have a strong presence and stake in the well-being of the community and facilitate opportunities for community-led mobilization and development. Supporting these key institutions would include designating resources to elevate the scope and scale of existing community-level training and capacity building initiatives focused on land use to maximize their collective impact and improve health equity outcomes.

“Adapting successful models from other regions and leveraging LA’s community-based organizational capacity could shift more land use decisions from being done to Angelenos to being done with and by them.”¹⁰

- **Develop and formally adopt inclusive outreach and public engagement standards**, modeled on Seattle’s and Portland’s approaches, which require community outreach to be culturally competent and linguistically appropriate. Public agency employees should receive training and continuing education on cultural and linguistic competency.
- **Prioritize engagement in “high need” or “disadvantaged” communities** following Seattle’s example. Seattle’s Department of Transportation devotes particular attention to engaging people in neighborhoods with high concentrations of immigrants, walking seniors, children, low-income households, and traffic injury “hot spots.”¹⁰

- **Develop and formally adopt early consultation and inclusive engagement practices for major land use projects** that are grounded in a health equity ethos. Government agencies, the private sector, and community-based anchor organizations should collaborate to ensure healthy, equitable, and active land uses. A good model is found in Los Angeles’ recently updated Quimby policy, which governs the dedication of parkland or the payment of fees in lieu of dedication of land to offset impacts of new residential development. One of its provisions requires developers of large residential housing projects to undergo and document an early consultation process with City agencies to determine whether land dedication may be required instead of in-lieu fees. Since land is harder to acquire in built-out urban areas, the early consultation process creates conditions more favorable to actually securing land for park space for underserved neighborhoods.

- **Coordinate community engagement approaches across city agencies** to reduce duplication of work and more effectively use resources.
- **Equip people who already have strong community engagement skills to become civic leaders and decision-makers** by scaling up efforts like Liberty Hill Foundation’s Commissions Training Program for Emerging Leaders. This program builds knowledge and capacity for community leaders and residents on the commissions-appointment process, civic decision-making processes, and internal and external approaches for influencing policy outcomes in order to ensure that there are strong community leaders serving on Los Angeles’ 52 regional government boards and commissions.¹¹



Strategy 3: Accelerate land use innovations and demonstration projects in low-income communities of color, and scale up successful pilot projects to drive policy change.

Lack of policy activity, developer investment, and other types of innovation in low-income communities has dire health consequences and partially explains lack of resident participation in land use and development decision-making processes. Strategies to incentivize innovation and invest in demonstration policies and projects can advance promising practices at the appropriate scale to enhance and strengthen community environments. At the same time, because land use innovations—such as transit oriented developments, bike lanes, or new parks—can inadvertently catalyze and accelerate gentrification and displacement, their unintended negative consequences must be considered far in advance and intentional actions taken to support long-term residents and small businesses to thrive in their communities.

Opportunities to accelerate land use innovations in low-income communities of color and scale up what works include:

- **Structure economic incentives that stimulate healthy land use projects**, particularly in low-income communities of color. Leveraging tools, such as providing expedited permitting and economic incentives for developers with explicit health equity provisions that meet certain minimum requirements would allow the City to catalyze healthy,

equitable land use initiatives; this would yield valuable benefits in communities that face significant health and safety challenges, and where investment has been absent, declining, or limited for decades.

- **Prioritize government and philanthropic investments in community-driven pilot or demonstration policies with the potential to be taken to scale to address pervasive land use problems.** An exemplary model of this strategy has emerged with LA's recently enacted Clean Up Green Up pilot land use policy, which couples traditional planning tools—development standards and conditional use permits—with economic incentives for small businesses to clean up their operations in three pilot communities with high concentrations of hazardous land uses that emit toxic pollutants.¹² While the lessons learned from implementation of this pilot will inform future efforts to scale up the policy citywide, Clean Up Green Up has already demonstrated the power of land use policy-focused partnerships involving community-based organizations, foundations, academic partners, and the City of Los Angeles.
- **Invest in and elevate community-based partners that have demonstrated capacity to engage residents in project design**

“Because land use innovations—such as transit oriented developments, bike lanes, or new parks—can inadvertently catalyze and accelerate gentrification and displacement, their unintended negative consequences must be considered far in advance, and intentional actions must be taken to support long-term residents and small businesses to thrive in their communities.”

and development. While many groups have the capacity to undertake innovative projects, fewer have the capacity to engage residents in project design and development in a manner that puts community needs and desires front and center. Public agencies and private funders should prioritize investment in community-based organizations that have both project development and community engagement skill sets to ensure innovative and equitable land use developments.

■ **Document, evaluate and promote effective land use innovation and demonstration projects and policies.** Because of LA’s size, when innovative land use projects or demonstration efforts are implemented, it is difficult for most Angelenos to experience the results, especially benefits, firsthand. Formal documentation and evaluation would ensure that the most effective innovation and demonstration efforts are promoted and advanced at a larger scale.

Strategy 4: Foster cross-government collaboration to embed health and equity in all land use decisions.

Many agencies within local government play a role in shaping the character and quality of neighborhoods. Working across jurisdictions and disciplines, departments can leverage their collective resources, still working within their mandates, to achieve win-win solutions across sectors and with community residents. A major benefit of cross sector work is the establishment of a shared sense of direction and deeper understanding of the unique skills and contributions other sectors may have. Further, cross sector work can lead to a “de-siloing” of funding and thinking.

Models of this approach already exist both inside and outside Los Angeles. In 2015, City of Los Angeles Mayor Garcetti released his Sustainable City pLAn and, by executive directive, decreed that every City department has a role to play in achieving LA’s sustainability goals.¹³ The Mayor appointed department-level Sustainability Officers who will work with the City’s Chief Sustainability Officer to implement the plan, demonstrating a broad commitment to this common vision. Los Angeles County has taken a similar approach to interdepartmental collaboration through its Healthy Design Workgroup, which brings together County staff from the departments of health,

public works, regional planning, parks and recreation, fire, and the arts commission, among others. The workgroup is charged with developing and implementing policies to encourage safe walking, biking, and access to transit; providing access to outdoor physical activities; and promoting community gardens and farmers’ markets. The workgroup’s interdepartmental grants team collaborates on fundraising for healthy design projects, leveraging the County’s investment with external funding.¹⁴

Priority strategies to foster cross-government collaboration to embed health and equity in all land use decisions include:

■ **Enact a citywide Health Equity in All Policies strategy and ordinance, and appoint department-level Health Equity Officers and a Chief Health Equity Officer.** Based on the City of Richmond, California’s [model](#), each Health Equity Officer would be responsible for integrating and tracking health equity indicators in their particular department, and the City would allocate funding to support the strategy.¹⁵ The group could operationalize the Plan for a Healthy Los

Angeles by promoting an integrated approach to healthy land use, planning, and development, particularly in economically distressed communities.

- **Adopt a framework within the City of Los Angeles to identify, evaluate, and communicate the potential impacts—both positive and negative—of all land use plans, policies, and projects on equity**, modeled on King County, Washington’s Equity Impact Review. Much like Health Impact Assessment, the [Equity Impact Review](#) is a process and a tool to rigorously analyze the impacts that a proposed action could have on equity in order to support informed decision-making.¹⁶

“This is a time of transformation in Los Angeles. Diverse voices for health equity are coalescing and reshaping the way land use decisions and investments are made.”

- **Broaden the focus of the City of Los Angeles Health Commission and the Los Angeles County Community Prevention and Population Health Task Force to include community-level determinants of health** such as safe streets, affordable housing, and parks and recreation spaces. These committees have been tasked with determining whether the health needs of Angelenos are being met and recommending policies and practices to improve population health in the city and county.^{17,18} A focus on what shapes people’s health in the first place—community conditions and inequities in resources and opportunity—is what’s critical.

Conclusion

This is a time of transformation in Los Angeles. Diverse voices for health equity are coalescing and reshaping the way land use decisions and investments are made. The strategies outlined in this brief emerged originally from a landscape analysis conducted in advance of the formation of the HEALU Network. They were expanded and refined by our Network’s multi-sector partners. Together, we collaborate proactively at a level that transcends work-arounds or campaigns to stop problematic developments. These four strategies will propel us towards a new norm in which economic incentives and political and social support drive strong policy change, and where public and private investments in innovative projects create value, social capital, and economic growth in under-served neighborhoods. Coupled

with robust community engagement activities by government agencies and non-profits, the result will be momentous: a healthier and more just, resilient, and prosperous Los Angeles, and a model for other cities and counties nationwide.

The HEALU Network looks forward to working with public and private sector groups to advance opportunities, both formal and informal, to deliberate, prioritize, and act upon these strategies to create a healthier, more equitable land use system in Los Angeles. We are hopeful that organizations and agencies outside of LA will be inspired by these approaches and build upon them, expanding the movement to build healthier, more equitable land use systems across the United States.

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Appendix – California Strategic Growth Council Healthy Community Framework

This framework was developed by California’s Health in All Policies Task Force, based on input from a wide variety of state agencies, community residents, and local leaders across the state. More information is available at www.sgc.ca.gov.

What is a Healthy Community?

A Healthy Community provides for the following through all stages of life:

MEETS BASIC NEEDS OF ALL

- † Safe, sustainable, accessible, and affordable transportation options
- † Affordable, accessible and nutritious foods, and safe drinkable water
- † Affordable, high-quality, socially integrated, and location-efficient housing
- † Affordable, accessible and high quality health care
- † Complete and livable communities including quality schools, parks and recreational facilities, child care, libraries, financial services and other daily needs
- † Access to affordable and safe opportunities for physical activity
- † Able to adapt to changing environments, resilient, and prepared for emergencies
- † Opportunities for engagement with arts, music and culture

QUALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY OF ENVIRONMENT

- † Clean air, soil and water, and environments free of excessive noise
- † Tobacco- and smoke-free
- † Green and open spaces, including healthy tree canopy and agricultural lands
- † Minimized toxics, green house gas emissions, and waste
- † Affordable and sustainable energy use
- † Aesthetically pleasing

ADEQUATE LEVELS OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

- † Living wage, safe and healthy job opportunities for all, and a thriving economy
- † Support for healthy development of children and adolescents
- † Opportunities for high quality and accessible education

HEALTH AND SOCIAL EQUITY

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS THAT ARE SUPPORTIVE AND RESPECTFUL

- † Robust social and civic engagement
- † Socially cohesive and supportive relationships, families, homes and neighborhoods
- † Safe communities, free of crime and violence



Source: Health in All Policies (HiAP) Task Force of the Strategic Growth Council