

POUNGING THE PAVEMENT FOR BETTER HEALTH

ULI Reinventing Roads to Improve Health

Van Nuys Boulevard is like a lot of arterials in Los Angeles and across the country — a main drag that puts a heavy drag on public health.

That’s especially true where Van Nuys Boulevard passes through the Pacoima neighborhood.

“This is one of the city’s most challenged neighborhoods in terms of health outcomes,” says Jonathan Nettler, director of the Urban Land Institute Los Angeles. “It has among the city’s highest concentrations of childhood obesity, diabetes and strokes.”

Physical activity such as walking and biking can help prevent chronic disease, but Van Nuys Boulevard does more harm than good in that regard. With few crosswalks, scant shade and no buffer between the sidewalk and five lanes of traffic, the corridor gives people in Pacoima little reason to get out of their cars and on their feet.

But that may change. The Pacoima leg of Van Nuys Boulevard is one of four places where local chapters of the Urban Land Institute (ULI) are leading demonstration projects aimed at helping corridors invite greater physical activity and provide other health benefits. The others are Vista Avenue in Boise, Charlotte Avenue in Nashville and Federal Boulevard in Denver.

Funded by a \$250,000 grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the projects will identify and apply specific remedies to each corridor and help ULI create a nationwide model for developing healthy corridors based on lessons learned.

One of the strategies being considered in Pacoima is to put Van Nuys Boulevard on a “road diet,” Nettler said. “That’s where you narrow or eliminate vehicle travel lanes to increase the space for pedestrians and bicyclists.”

Once stakeholders finalize Pacoima’s strategy, temporary “pop-up” changes will be made sometime in 2016, Nettler said. What happens after that depends on how the city and the community respond, but the hope is that permanent changes follow.



Vista Avenue in Boise allows for very little physical activity along the street.

Photos by Jimmy Emerson DVM



(Below) ULI/Pacoima Walking Tour of Van Nuys Boulevard



Courtesy of LA DOT

“The science is clear that a sedentary lifestyle built around auto-based mobility is often associated with poor health outcomes,” Nettler said. “There is an opportunity here to do some things that we know can get people moving.”

Get Out and Walk to School!

One of the saddest parallels between the decline of walking in daily life and the prevalence of chronic disease in the United States is the rise in childhood obesity.

Between 1980 and 2012, the number of children ages 6-11 who were obese grew to 18 percent from 7 percent and the number of children ages 12-19 who were obese grew to 21 percent from 5 percent, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

A likely contributing factor: fewer kids walk to school these days. In 1969, nearly half of children ages 5-14 typically walked or biked to school, according to the National Center for Safe Routes to Schools (NCSRS). Over the next 40 years, the number declined to just 13 percent.

The same safety and convenience concerns that discourage adults from walking — missing sidewalks and crosswalks, high traffic speeds and volume, crime and personal security — are doubly troubling for children, so it’s understandable why many parents feel more comfortable driving their child to school.

Yet children need at least an hour of physical activity a day to grow up healthy and help prevent chronic disease, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Social Services. Driving kids to school who could walk or bike is “a missed opportunity to build physical activity into their day,” says Dr. Jason Mendoza of Seattle Children’s Research Institute.



The federal Safe Routes to School Program provides funding to help communities make walking and biking to school safer and easier. The NCSRS shares information about the program, supplies technical support and offers tips on successful strategies such as walking school buses.

A walking school bus is a group of children walking to school accompanied by one or more adults to alleviate safety concerns. Mendoza is leading a study to learn whether the exercise gained from joining a walking school bus can lead children to be more physically active throughout the entire day and help prevent obesity.

Mendoza is measuring the body mass index of each child in the study — grades three through five — at the start and the end of the school year and tracking their physical activity by giving them wearable activity monitors. The study will compare data from a group of schools where Mendoza’s team is leading walking school buses to a group of schools without walking school buses.

“People are realizing we are spending way too much time sitting,” Mendoza said. “We need to be moving to be healthy.” ●



Courtesy of Missouri Bicycle and Pedestrian Federation