



PUBLIC HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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The Future of Kittitas County: Planning For Healthier Communities

The fundamental work of Public Health is to prevent and reduce disease. The disease burdens of the 21st century are chronic diseases like heart disease, diabetes, obesity, asthma, and depression.

With obesity rates that have increased 33 percent in the last decade and an epidemic that will soon take tobacco's place as the number one preventable cause of death, public health officials at the national, state and local levels are recognizing the importance of how we build our communities and the impact it can have on the disease burdens we are facing. The environment we build not only impacts disease, but also impacts the broad spectrum of health—socially, emotionally, psychologically, and physically.

A community that builds an environment where it is as easy to make healthy choices, as it is to make unhealthy choices is a community that is on the cutting edge of tackling the health challenges we are now facing.

There are many factors that influence an individual's overall health. What we know in public health is that educating people, adults and youth alike, regarding healthy choices has never been the entire answer to our public health concerns. What we also know is that we have been able to make drastic changes in public health by implementing policy change that improves health and changes behaviors over time. This has been evident in health issues such as lead in the environment, vehicle fatalities and seatbelt use, immunizations, and most recently with laws around tobacco and second hand smoke.

Local governments, City and County alike, are working together to look at the development of our county and the many aspects that go into the comprehensive planning process. In our county 41 percent of adults are over weight, 28 percent of adults are obese and 34 percent of Kittitas County adults are at risk for health problems due to lack of exercise. Our youth are also effected, with only 32 percent of youth between 8th and 12th grade reporting more than 20 minutes of daily aerobic exercise. These data provide a mandate for us to look seriously at the impacts of our planning and land development efforts.

So what are some ways that we can build our communities to promote health? How do we plan for a healthier future?

- ? First, by putting mixed uses of land in close proximity to one another, (businesses next to residential) we encourage alternatives to driving, such as walking and biking. Twenty five percent of all trips that people make are one mile or less, but 75 percent of these trips are made by car. The number of trips the average American adult takes on foot each year

To Protect and Promote the Health and the Environment of the People of Kittitas County

dropped 42 percent between 1975-1995. Among children, walking trips have dropped 37 percent. Mixed land usage also enables one third of our population that is too old, too young, or too poor to drive, to walk or bike to service areas and to stay healthier longer.

- ? Secondly, by providing a variety of transportation choices (such as, including biking lanes in our road standards and ensuring the placement of sidewalks in neighborhoods), we encourage physical activity and discourage automobile use.
- ? Third, by connecting neighborhoods built on a grid system or on a cul-de-sac to adjacent residential areas, to schools, to parks, and to shopping areas, we encourage adults and children to walk or bike, not drive, to their destinations.

Tackling the disease burdens of today will take a comprehensive effort from public health. Addressing the way we build the environment around us is one of those efforts. Designing communities that accommodate and encourage physical activity as a regular, routine part of our daily lives will specifically help reverse the obesity trends we are currently experiencing in our county.

Health benefits will result when people live and work in walkable, safe, well designed communities. As policymakers you have an unprecedented opportunity to impact the health, well-being, and quality of life for the residents of your community for years to come. Kittitas County Public Health urges you to be thoughtful and deliberate in your discussions and your decisions.

