Standing up to the car culture

The county's addiction to the road is legend. Now cities might map streets friendlier to walkers -- and waistlines.

By Tamara Koehler, tkoehler@VenturaCountyStar.com
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One sweltering Atlanta day on his way to work at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Dr. Richard Jackson had an epiphany.

He was stuck in traffic on the seven-lane Buford Highway, voted one of the 10 worst streets in the nation because of the lack of sidewalks, high number of pedestrian deaths, and endless strip malls. Looking out the window, Jackson spotted an elderly woman trudging along the shoulder in the 95 degree heat, lugging two heavy bags, the sun beating down on her head. She had to walk two miles between traffic lights to get to a pedestrian crosswalk.

"I was concerned about her; she was really struggling, and then it struck me," said Jackson, who was then director of environmental health at the CDC.

"If this woman collapsed and died, it would be listed as heat stroke, not a lack of trees and poor urban planning. If a truck hit her, it would be listed as motor-vehicle trauma not a lack of sidewalks, public transportation and failed political leadership."

The way communities have been designed in the last half-century has helped make Americans fatter, sadder, isolated and unhealthy, argues Jackson, a nationally renowned pediatrician now teaching at UC Berkeley.

Communities, including much of Ventura County, have been built for the car. Sidewalks and bike lanes are either nonexistent or too narrow and too close to wide busy roads. Shops and schools are miles from predominantly single-family homes, well beyond walking distance, and strip malls have replaced town centers. Fast-food restaurants and convenience stores stocked with high-calorie snacks and sodas are on every street corner, many right next to schools.

"We have designed communities that engineered walking and bicycling and social contact out of our lives, encouraged unhealthy eating choices, and fostered a loss of community," Jackson said. "Our housing policies are health policies."

Jackson, who spoke in Oxnard on Friday to a crowd of public health workers, planners and politicians, is the guru of a growing movement to make obesity prevention and physical activity centerpieces of American urban planning.

Ventura County's Public Health Department, which hosted the forum, plans to form a task force to examine how development is affecting our health.

"It's not just a matter of eating too much, it's partly the built environment as well," said Dr. Robert Levin, the county's public health officer and medical director. "When we design new developments without sidewalks it's a clear message that you should drive everywhere. It's become acceptable not to walk, and that has had consequences."

The fattening of America

From Ventura County to Sacramento, the impact of sprawl is most evident in the soaring numbers of people who are now overweight or obese.

Ambulance companies have had to upgrade their gurneys' weight-bearing capability from 300 pounds to 500 pounds. Stomach-stapling surgeries have quadrupled in the past five years, with children now joining the ranks of potential patients.

American adults are 10 pounds heavier than a decade ago, with nearly two-thirds of adults either overweight or obese. Obesity is defined as being more than 20 percent over your ideal weight.

Today's average 10-year-old boy weighs 11 pounds more than his counterpart in 1963. About a quarter of America's
children are overweight, with one in seven classified as obese.

More than half the adults in Ventura County — 52 percent — push the scales well past a healthy weight, with about one in five considered obese. On average, 20 percent of local children are overweight or obese. That number is nearly double in the cities of Oxnard, at 35 percent, and Santa Paula, at 39 percent.

With the fattening of America comes a host of diseases and medical costs. Diet-related Type II diabetes will be the disease of the 21st century, they warn, shortening life spans of the afflicted by 22 years. One third of new diabetes cases are children. If the obesity epidemic continues, one out of three children born in 2000 will develop Type II diabetes, according to the National Institutes of Health.

"This will be the first generation in American history to live less than their parents if things continue as they are," Jackson said.

Adult chronic health problems are now appearing in children.

"We're seeing kids with high blood pressure, high cholesterol, conditions we've typically only seen in adults," said Levin. "It's directly related to obesity and inactivity."

The reasons why

The obesity epidemic is exacerbated by a blend of modern-day realities. Television and computers have become the dominant entertainment. Fast-food and restaurant portions are super-sized and dripping with saturated fats. High-fructose corn syrup is practically a food group, permeating everything from soda to fruit snacks, cereals, breads, baked beans and applesauce.

Meanwhile, the amount of incidental physical activity — walking to a store, to school, to a park — has plummeted, largely because of the car.

A recent travel survey ranked six Southern California counties — Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, Los Angeles, Imperial and Ventura — for travel habits and dependency on the car. Of the six, Ventura County had the most vehicles per household, besting the car capital of the country, Los Angeles.

Walking accounted for only 9 percent of all trips in Ventura County, compared to 14 percent in Los Angeles County.

For children, walking to school has traditionally been a form of daily exercise, but that practice has almost disappeared. Forty years ago, roughly half — 49 percent — of school children walked or rode bicycles to school. Today, only 16 percent do.

The Health Department and schools have programs encouraging children to eat more fruits and vegetables, drink more water, and be more active. The message, however, is muted by the lack of parks, sidewalks and safe streets in many communities, Levin said.

"It's easier to bring about the changes we need to when our environment supports a healthy body weight," Levin said. "There's personal responsibility; people need to stop eating when they stop being hungry; they need to exercise every day. But our communities need to be designed to promote health and physical activity, and many have not. These are problems that thinking, well-meaning people can solve."

New solutions

In the next few months, a county task force will begin a "walkability" survey of cities and neighborhoods across the county. They will examine general plans and meet with city and county planners and traffic engineers. A consultant has been hired who has worked with other California cities implementing new development standards addressing the obesity epidemic and physical fitness. Chino is one of them.

Faced with staggering rates of heart disease, diabetes, and other obesity-related diseases, Chino's City Council re-evaluated development and zoning standards, said Nicholas Liguori, principal planner. Now the city has added a health element to its general plan mandating "walkability" for redevelopment and all new construction.

"It was something that just couldn't be ignored," Liguori said. "We're also addressing mental health in our general plan, ways that will improve a sense of community, bring people together, and even public art and the impact it has on mental health."

While several local cities have added bike paths and creation of town centers to their general plans, none are addressing the role development plays in obesity prevention.

If a recent bill introduced in the California Assembly passes, Levin will be authorized to "assist" in local land-use and transportation planning as it relates to obesity and chronic diseases. The bill, backed by health officers statewide, brings back the role public health used to play in neighborhood construction. When tenements were built next to
slaughterhouses causing all sorts of disease outbreaks, public health stepped in, and zoning laws were born.

"Now we have another public health crisis related to community design — obesity," Jackson said. "Public health should definitely be at the table."

Levin points to the city of Ventura as a model for the rest of the county. The city has committed to new development standards that promote walking and cycling. Downtown was renovated into a town center with tree-lined sidewalks and mixed-use zoning that allows people to live above downstairs shops.

Parking is diagonal and on the street, which promotes the "park once" concept, said Bill Fulton, an urban planning expert and Ventura city councilman.

"The strategy is maybe you have to drive, but at least when you get there you only have to park once," Fulton said. "The benefits of that are, one, you don't need as much parking space, and two, it almost creates walking as a more essential way of getting around."

Riverpark, a new 700-acre mixed-use development in Oxnard, also reflects the new thinking in urban design. The project encourages walking by clustering most destinations — including shopping and school — within a five-to-10-minute distance. The network of streets equally accommodates bikes, pedestrians and automobiles.

In Jackson’s career as a pediatrician and environmental health physician, he has helped pass national laws reducing lead in the environment. In California, the Birth Defects Monitoring Program was his brainchild.

The obesity epidemic among children is his latest cause, one he believes can be moderated, at least in part, by changing the way we build communities.

"Every child in America ought to have the right to walk or bike safely to school," said Jackson, who received the Presidential Distinguished Executive Award in 2005.

"I'm pretty passionate that what is good for our bodies, particularly our children's bodies, is this: Eat food that's locally grown, mostly vegetables. Use less fossil fuels. Get exercise and be around people you love. Those things work for individuals, families, communities, the state, the nation and the planet."

By the numbers

$28 billion: Obesity and physical inactivity's cost in medical expenses and lost productivity in California.

80 percent: Cases of Type II diabetes in California that are obesity-related.

1 in 2: Overweight and obese adults in Ventura County.

1 in 4: Overweight and obese Latino children in Ventura County.

1 in 5: Overweight and obese white children in Ventura County.

— Sources: California Department of Health Services, Ventura County Public Health Department, National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases

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