

PATH leads to transportation equity

By Jennifer Rice, Redwood Community Action Agency

The Redwood Community Action Agency in Humboldt County won the 2007 NSCCAPA Leadership Advocacy Planning Award for its effort to develop practical measures for improving the equity of transportation decisions and investments.

Its effort is called PATH—Planning for Active Transportation and Health.

Regional transportation planning agencies and planning departments are increasingly being challenged to meet Civil Rights Act and Environmental Justice regulations while still addressing the needs of their communities. This project was an effort to incorporate Planning for Active Transportation and Health (PATH) into decision-making processes as a way to address these regulations and improve overall access for community members.

The PATH model is not a revolutionary concept intended to overhaul existing planning processes. It is an evolution of conventional processes, designed to help planners and decision-makers comply with federal and state regulations, while still providing their respective communities with opportunities for equal access. The model recognizes that:

- Transportation, land use, and economic development decisions are inextricably linked, and
- Transportation investments affect public health and social equity.

A new perspective

To collectively modify the standard tools, policies and funding programs that contribute to inequitable, unhealthy and unsustainable transportation decisions, a new perspective is needed on how to:

- **Efficiently get people where they need to go**—plan for community access to services, employment, and education. In the PATH model, enhancing mobility is not the goal, but is instead one strategy among many toward achieving the overarching goal of improved equitability through increased access.
- **Consider everyone's needs**—establish a planning process and system for investments that clearly considers, includes and addresses the needs of the whole community, including transportation-disadvantaged populations.
- **Look ahead**—proactively consider the impacts of transportation decisions and investments on public health, social equity, land use and economic development, and involve a diverse spectrum of professionals and stake holders to assist in the transportation planning process.
- **Learn from ourselves**—periodically review progress, adapt to 'best practices' information, and evaluate and adjust planning and design practices to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of transportation planning and investments.

Guide to the project

The PATH effort includes a series of in-depth reports and supporting resources. The following documents and online resources are a product of a Caltrans Environmental Justice

Program-funded grant to the County of Humboldt and Redwood Community Action Agency.

- *A Summary of Research*, which also includes a literature review and preliminary discussion of Humboldt County transportation issues.
- Numerous gatherings of transportation, land use, health, social service and economic development professionals between November 2005 and May 2006.
- *A Best Practices Report* that provides rural regions with ideas about transportation equity, multi-disciplinary planning efforts, promoting access and active transportation, and highlights numerous planning and decision-making tools.
- *The Humboldt County Transportation-Disadvantaged Populations Report* featuring intriguing GIS maps of disadvantaged populations, bicycle- and pedestrian-vehicle collisions and access to public transit services.
- The *PATH Guide*, a compilation of ideas, examples and resources to help rural governments shift decision-making perspectives to find affordable, practical ways to improve transportation equity.
- Recommended strategies to improve public participation, active transportation and community access in *Opportunities for Improving Transportation Equity in Humboldt County*.

These documents and resources can be viewed at www.nrscaa.org/path.

The PATH model

The PATH model outlines six basic procedural steps.



At first glance, the model may look similar to conventional transportation planning processes, but there are several differences, including an emphasis to:

- Link transportation goals to broader community goals for equity, public health, economic development and land use.

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- Consider a diversity of planning inputs (e.g., hard data, qualitative information, maps of target populations, personal stories).
- Use inclusive, innovative public participation techniques to understand actual community needs.
- Consult the latest ‘best practices’ and research to help prioritize which transportation investments will achieve strategic goals.
- Create funding partnerships to get multimodal projects moving forward and build local stewardship.
- Ensure accountability in planning, contracting, and construction management so multimodal projects are delivered intact.
- Evaluate outcomes to ensure transportation investments are cost-effective in achieving community goals, and revise investment as necessary to better achieve goals.

Next steps

In the last decade, a broad effort was made to incorporate the words ‘pedestrian’ and ‘bicycle’ into standard transportation planning documents, manuals and actions. The PATH project proposes a next step in the U.S. transportation paradigm: incorporate transportation equity into those documents, manuals and actions.

It takes time to evolve standard decision-making processes. Working toward proactive planning, design and implementation of transportation systems that promote improved social, economic and public health will require further experimentation, innovative perspectives and, most importantly, new multi-disciplinary partnerships.

What matters most is that individuals working at every level of the process ask critically how their respective efforts can more functionally promote equitable transportation decision-making. Such an achievement is by no means an unattainable goal, especially when approached strategy by strategy, and if it is acknowledged as a priority at every level of government, with the support and participation of community stakeholders and the community as a whole.

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