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CITIES HAVE UNIQUE CHANCE TO PLAN FOR HEALTHY FUTURE

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Memo: Frederick J. Ferrer is CEO of the Health Trust. He wrote this article for this newspaper.

It is not every day that our community has a chance to create policy that is good for our health and makes Silicon Valley a leader for the rest of the country. We have that opportunity before us in finalizing the new general plans for several cities throughout San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties. A city's **general plan**, which must be approved by its city council, is a set of policies that guide the physical development of the city. If these plans are well designed, the cities become places where residents live healthy and communities thrive.

A well designed **general plan** envisions a city that looks less like suburban sprawl and more like a patchwork quilt. Rather than miles of homes set apart from shopping areas, new homes and businesses will be located closer to existing shops and public transportation, including Caltrain. Existing neighborhoods will have village centers, places where residents can walk or bike to the market, the community center, public transportation, shops and dining.

This model city is good for the health of the young and the old. Currently, more than half of the residents of Silicon Valley are overweight or obese. Our children are also gaining weight; today only one in 10 walks to school compared with the majority just a generation ago. By creating communities where residents can safely walk to the market, school, the train station and even work, we encourage people to spend more time engaged in physical activity. Planning for complete streets -- those that best support pedestrian and bike traffic -- is an essential part of this.

The patchwork quilt model also benefits older residents. For example, by 2030, one out of every five residents in Santa Clara County will be over age 65. As part of our Healthy Aging Initiative at The Health Trust, we know that daily physical activity is the most effective measure people can take to remain healthy as they age.

In Europe, where cities are denser and the pedestrian infrastructure is better, 50 percent of seniors walk or bike compared with just 8 percent of American seniors. Moreover, many older adults here -- especially those who do not

drive -- are trapped in suburbs. Those who live close to shopping centers are more likely to remain mobile and independent. Additional senior housing is critical and must take location into account.

Several patches on the quilt should be parks and gardens. In **San Jose**, there are currently 51 residential areas that do not have access to a park, school, or open space within one third of a mile. Likewise, fast-food and convenience stores outnumber grocery stores and produce markets by a ratio of almost 5 to 1.

Often, our neighborhoods with people of lower income suffer the most; children have higher incidences of diabetes because there is no healthy food to eat and no safe place to play. A Latino child in our county has a one in two chance of developing diabetes. A well designed **general plan** can change these statistics over time by calling for more community gardens and produce markets and fewer drive-through windows.

If you haven't been following the **general plan** process in your city, now is the time to get engaged. Reach out to your local council members and urge them to support a plan that promotes health. For information in **San Jose**, go to www.sanjoseca.gov/planning/.

Silicon Valley's cities have been models for the rest of the country in so many ways. It is time we became a model of how city planning can promote health -- for current residents and future generations.

