

CHAPTER 4: HAPPY AND HEALTHY CITIES

Introduction

Vibrant Neighborhoods

Abundant housing and great transportation networks make a city function — but what truly makes for a great city is the people. Cities are, first and foremost, large agglomerations of people, each of whom has their own dreams, ambitions, loyalties, and unique perspective on the world. The city is one of humankind's greatest achievements because it brings together tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even millions of people and mixes their collective genius together into something new.

A city thrives when its people thrive, and it struggles when its people struggle. In previous chapters, we've described how California can ensure that its cities offer two of the necessary preconditions for flourishing — housing and freedom of movement — to everyone who dwells in them.

But access to good housing and strong transportation networks aren't enough on their own. People should also have joyous, inclusive, and vibrant neighborhoods. They need opportunities to explore their interests and work toward their goals, both individually and collectively. These things may be more difficult to quantify than rent costs and commute times, but they are part of what makes cities great.

This chapter's recommendations are intended to create more opportunities for happiness and flourishing in California's cities. They include recommendations for creating more urban green space, encouraging local entrepreneurship, facilitating community events, and increasing residents' access to high-quality public resources. This chapter also includes recommendations for mitigating or eradicating some of the environmental harms that impede our cities' potential: harms such as noise pollution and social isolation.

California has an incredible wealth of resources. But its most important resource is its people: both current Californians and future ones. The more we help each other to thrive, the better off we will all be.

Recommendations

Incremental

Create state guidelines for activating underutilized spaces in urban areas

The vast majority of road space in California cities is reserved for the use and storage of cars. During the Covid-19 pandemic, some of this space was repurposed for outdoor dining, which created vibrant street life where none had existed before.

California should build on that success by providing cities with guidance and funding to help them transform curbside parking and other poorly used public spaces into pocket parks, commercial space for small businesses, art installations, and other public-serving uses. This guidance should include recommendations related to cost control and accessibility for people with disabilities.

Establish an “Adopt-a-Park” program

All Californians deserve convenient access to green space. To help make that a reality, the state should operate an “Adopt-a-Park” program similar to the existing [Adopt-a-Highway Program](#) that funds highway maintenance. Several cities — including [San Jose](#), [Sunnyvale](#), [Davis](#), [Fairfield](#), and [Bakersfield](#) — currently operate their own Adopt-a-Park programs, but no statewide effort currently exists.

A statewide program would solicit financial contributions and volunteer work from individuals and organizations to support the maintenance, operation, and improvement of parks. Additionally, it would lead to the creation of new parks on currently underutilized space in areas with limited existing park access.

Fund liability insurance requirements for public community events

Closing down streets for community events like block parties, concerts, and street fairs promotes social connectedness, economic growth, and public engagement. Unfortunately, many grassroots organizations struggle to put on these events due to the cost and complexity of meeting local liability insurance requirements.

The state should establish a subsidy program to help grassroots groups insure community-serving public events. Additionally, the state should produce risk assessment guidelines and training programs to help local agencies identify and mitigate potential risks associated with community events.

Incorporate ‘quiet pavement’ requirements into transportation planning guidelines and encourage the use of new pavement technologies aimed at creating quieter roadways

Roads, particularly those that carry high-speed traffic, are a significant source of noise pollution. More than a simple irritant, residential noise pollution can cause chronic sleep loss, heart disease, dementia, and even [premature death](#). Thanks to environmental racism and the lingering effects of segregation, Black and Latino households are disproportionately likely to suffer these effects.

In the interest of public health and racial equity, the state should mitigate road noise pollution by requiring any California Department of Transportation project to use [quiet pavement](#) and other road noise mitigation strategies wherever feasible.

Additionally, the state should encourage greater use of traffic-calming measures in cities that will slow down cars and further reduce noise. For more, see [Chapter 3: Mobility](#).

Increase California’s urban tree canopy

Trees enhance urban life in myriad ways: they beautify our streetscapes, [enhance physical and emotional well-being](#), [provide badly-needed shade](#), [mitigate the urban heat island effect](#), [remove carbon dioxide](#) from the air, [absorb flood waters](#), and can even [stimulate economic growth](#) in shopping districts. Unfortunately, our urban tree canopy is [inequitably distributed](#): low-income and historically redlined areas disproportionately lack high-quality tree canopy.

The state has provided some nonprofits with [small grants](#) to encourage the planting of trees, but as yet it has not engaged in a large-scale effort to increase statewide urban tree canopy.

The state should implement policies to increase urban forestation and remedy the inequitable distribution of mature urban tree canopy. To start, the state should compile an inventory of existing tree canopy and set ambitious annual targets for increasing urban forestation. The state should also measure the urban heat island effect in neighborhoods that lack urban tree canopy and specifically target those regions with grants and incentives to encourage forestation.

These grants and incentives should include stable long-term funding for watering, pruning, and maintenance. The goal should be to increase mature urban tree canopy; that means local jurisdictions will need to be funded for long enough to bring younger trees to maturity.

Neighborhoods that benefit from this program should plant a mixture of male and female trees. Currently, many cities plant male trees almost exclusively because they do not bear fruit and require less maintenance. But the overreliance on male trees creates perverse consequences: male trees [are worse for seasonal allergies](#). And fruiting trees, while sometimes messy, can also be a free source of fresh produce for city residents.

The state should fund the additional cleaning costs incurred by cities that plant a mix of male and female trees. Additionally, the state should offer guidance on where to plant female trees so that their fruit causes minimal mess on sidewalks and doesn't impede the use of walkers and wheelchairs.

Lastly, the state should develop an education campaign to encourage local governments, residents, businesses, and community groups to plant more trees.

Increase transit options to access state and regional parks

In addition to increasing urban tree canopy, the state should ensure that as many Californians as possible have convenient bike, pedestrian, and transit access to state and regional parks by identifying barriers to access and offering grants to help local agencies improve accessibility, particularly for parks-poor communities.

Legalize accessory commercial units in residential zones

Thanks to [state reforms](#) since 2016, accessory dwelling units (ADUs) are now a critical source of new, less-expensive housing in single-family neighborhoods.

However, state ADU reforms only allow dwelling units. Small-scale commercial uses remain illegal in single family zones. That means most people still have to get in the car and drive to get a cup of coffee, buy groceries, or grab a bite to eat.

To improve walkability, reduce vehicle miles traveled, and encourage vibrant street life, the state should step in and allow [accessory commercial units](#) in residential areas. Doing so would allow people to legally operate home-based businesses out of their garages or new freestanding spaces on their property.

Transformative

Encourage the development of free public bathroom facilities

More public areas statewide should have clean, high-quality bathroom facilities. But with the exception of [AB 1017 \(2021\)](#), there have been few legislative proposals to expand public bathroom access in recent years. (AB 1017 made it out of the Assembly but did not pass the Senate.)

To that end, the state should dedicate funding to the development and maintenance of public restrooms at key locations, including major transit stops, transportation hubs, parks, major business districts, recreational areas, and popular tourist destinations.

Further, the state should end its well-meaning but misguided [50-year-old ban on pay toilets](#). While free public bathrooms are better than paid bathrooms, a pay-to-use bathroom is better than none at all.

The state should also offer incentives and tax benefits to private businesses that open their restrooms to the public without charge. This approach would be similar to the “community toilet scheme” that [created dozens of public restrooms](#) in London’s central business district.

Increase state funding to improve existing public libraries and build new ones

For countless people, especially children, public libraries provide life-changing access to the world’s knowledge and great literature. But libraries are often a low funding priority for local governments: something that is nice to have, but first in line for cuts when budgets get tight.

The state should step in and provide a dedicated funding stream for public libraries, one that would be separate from general education funding. This money should be used to expand hours, services, programs, and media inventory at existing libraries, as well as to open new libraries in underserved communities.

Institute an Office of Noise Abatement and Control

In 1972, the federal government created an Office of Noise Abatement and Control (ONAC), housed within the Environmental Protection Agency, to oversee national efforts to mitigate noise pollution. Unfortunately, ONAC was disbanded less than a decade later.

California should establish its own version of ONAC, possibly housed within the state Environmental Protection Agency, to combat [the disastrous public health consequences](#) of persistent noise pollution. This office would have the authority to promulgate regulations related to the sale and modification of noise-emitting machinery, such as cars and leaf blowers. For example, ONAC might introduce regulations capping the maximum allowable decibel level for car engine noise in California.

Additionally, the agency would be able to introduce regulations related to construction noise in residential areas, as well as building code standards for insulating homes and apartments from environmental noise.

Lastly, ONAC would provide guidance to local agencies on how to more effectively mitigate noise impacts in residential areas affected by chronic noise pollution issues.