

# Taking a walk in Alameda County

By Victoria Eisen and Niko Letunic

*The Alameda Countywide Strategic Pedestrian Plan won this year's NSCCAPA Focused Issue Planning Award. The Plan represents one of the most comprehensive countywide pedestrian planning efforts undertaken to date, particularly in a county as large and diverse as Alameda County.*

Every day in Alameda County, over 500,000 trips are made on foot. That's 12 percent of all trips. After driving, walking in is the second most popular way to get around the county. Walking is a fundamental, age-old form of transportation, which today links people to all other forms of transportation. In Alameda County, 90 percent of trips to AC Transit and 25 percent of those to BART are made on foot.

While these numbers indicate the popularity of walking, the number of pedestrians has actually decreased over the past few decades. Physical inactivity is now widely understood to play a significant role in the most common chronic diseases, including heart disease, stroke and diabetes, all of which are leading causes of death in Alameda County. Further, pedestrians account for one-quarter of all transportation-related deaths in Alameda County, double the percentage of people who are walking. These tragic numbers reveal a critical need for safe and vibrant pedestrian environments that inspire walking and are at the center of healthy communities.

## Mandate for countywide pedestrian plan

With these circumstances as backdrop, and with a mandate from Alameda County voters that walking, bicycling and public transit must be essential elements of the county's transportation system, in 2005 the Alameda County Transportation Improvement Authority (ACTIA) commissioned a countywide pedestrian plan. The agency—which is

responsible for implementing the voter-approved transportation sales tax measure—had two primary motivations:

1. **Elevate the value and importance of walking as a legitimate transportation mode.** The steps toward achieving this objective were to create a snapshot of walking in Alameda County today, catalog institutional obstacles to walking, provide a vision of the countywide pedestrian environment in 2030, and develop goals and strategies needed to attain that vision.
2. **Craft a plan to guide ACTIA's expenditures for pedestrian improvements.** Alameda's countywide bicycle plan had for years defined priority investments in the bicycle network. ACTIA wanted a corresponding document that would guide its investment in creating walkable communities and would halt unfocused spending on pedestrian projects. To do so, the agency sought to identify countywide priorities, estimate costs and compare these costs to projected revenue.

To undertake the study, the County hired the planning firm of Eisen | Letunic which partnered with Alta Planning + Design for technical skills and Lohnes+Wright, map and GIS specialists.

## The Plan and its Toolkit

While local pedestrian master plans identify needed improvements at specific locations, the Alameda Countywide Strategic Pedestrian Plan concentrates on identifying and prioritizing pedestrian projects, programs and planning efforts of countywide significance. These fall into three categories:

1. Access to public transit
2. Activity centers (including downtowns and commercial districts)
3. Inter-jurisdictional trails

Using the categories, local jurisdictions can assess how best to improve their own pedestrian environments and determine worthwhile improvements.

The Plan is original in its countywide coverage and in the provision of a companion "Toolkit for Improving Walkability in Alameda County" to facilitate implementation. The Plan has detailed discussions of walk access to public transit, the relationship between walking and public health, programs that have been shown to encourage a long-term shift to walking, and detailed cost estimates that demonstrate the enormous gap between spending on the pedestrian environment and the amount needed for such improvements.

The quality, usefulness, accessibility and presentation of these documents benefited from ACTIA's extremely committed staff and Bicycle/Pedestrian Advisory Committee and from a very involved technical working group, which included traffic engineers, transportation planners, trail planners, pedestrian advocates, transit access specialists and public health professionals.

## How is the Plan being used?

Although the Plan was adopted less than a year ago, it is already being used to allocate Measure B (transportation sales tax) funding. Beyond funding, the Plan is guiding ACTIA's internal work plan in prioritizing staff efforts and internal funding. For instance, the agency has appointed a pedestrian working group to continue to tap into the energy generated by the Plan's working group, and is planning a walking promotion campaign, training sessions for traffic engineers and others, and technical assistance for local governments.

A third outcome is that ACTIA is initiating nontraditional alliances with other governmental agencies and advocates, particularly in the fields of public health and community livability. Beyond ACTIA, municipalities, transit agencies, park districts and others are turning to the Plan for the detailed data it provides, are using this information to help identify and prioritize the most effective ways to create communities that invite and celebrate walking, and are

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gathering arguments for elevating the importance of pedestrian planning.

### Walking into the future

ACTIA is already thinking of ways in which the first Plan update—scheduled for 2011—can be even more useful than the original. By the time the update is prepared, 2010 Census data will begin to become available. In five years, programs funded as a result of ACTIA's newly defined priorities—such as TravelSmart and Safe Routes to Schools—will have had sufficient track records to establish their effectiveness, or lack thereof. By 2011, processes and methodology may be available for improved collision statistic analysis. Lastly, in concert with significant investment planned for Bus Rapid Transit and BART extensions in Alameda County, there will be ample opportunities to allocate Measure B funds according to the priorities laid out in the Alameda Countywide Strategic Pedestrian Plan.

*The authors, with a combined 30 years of public sector planning experience, established the partnership of Eisen | Letunic in 2005. A significant portion of their background is in the fields of bicycle and pedestrian planning and advocacy, smart growth, and closely related disciplines. ■*



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