4 External Factors influencing Health Status and Quality of Life

As the sources and materials cited in this study, San Mateo County has long recognized the need to prepare for an aging population. The county’s Health System, the Department of Transportation, and many other agencies, non-profits and businesses are taking steps to meet the demands of tomorrow’s seniors. They also acknowledge that these demands are likely to be different from today’s seniors as was evident in a recent survey conducted by the Health System’s Health Policy and Planning Division among Baby Boomers.

A joint vision for a healthy San Mateo County was formulated:

“We must prepare for the aging baby boomer population by developing communities that prevent diseases today and support healthy aging for tomorrow. These are communities where people of all ages have the ability to thrive, including the older adults of today and tomorrow.” Source: San Mateo County Health System, Health Planning and Policy. (2010). Maintaining the Health of an Aging San Mateo County.

In addition to high-quality, effective and affordable healthcare services, this statement enshrines the vision for a community where environmental, social and economic features are seen in unison and are protected, strengthened and built to allow people to live healthy, productive lives and to age with dignity and as part of the community at large.

The environmental factors are the focus of this chapter. Research – and common sense – has shown that a livable, healthy community is characterized by:

- Making it easy and safe for people to walk, bike, ride public transit and engage in everyday physical activity,
- Having a diversity of housing options, including a sufficient amount of affordable housing that brings together people at all stages of life and allows families and friends to remain in close proximity to provide ongoing support and reduce social isolation,
- Designing and maintaining public gathering and recreation facilities in all neighborhoods that provide for outdoor activities and enhance a sense of community and facilitate social connections,
- Having a low crime rate and a high level of community to keep watch over neighborhood streets and neighbors,
- Making affordable, fresh and healthy food accessible,
- Having zoning laws and ordinances that promote mixed use and place neighborhood services and retail near housing to allow for an easy walk between home and everyday destinations, including through the creation of neighborhood centers,
- Having communities and neighborhoods that are diverse and connected by reliable, frequent and safe forms of public transit so people can get around without a car,
- Facilitating volunteerism and opportunities to maintain social connections in order to reduce the risk of social isolation,
- Offering an array of support services according to income and as alternatives to institutional care.
The following sections address a number of these design principles for health communities by providing geospatial maps that can help planners to juxtapose the areas were most of the county’s current seniors are living with the location of services and amenities that facilitate healthy aging. By doing so the map can help identify areas where services or accessibility are lacking.

4.1 Availability of and location of affordable housing

Many seniors in San Mateo County are homeowners. Owning a home is an important source of financial security but also an emotional connection to a place and community. Seventy-seven percent of Baby Boomers own a single family home and 23 percent no longer carry a mortgage on their property. On the other hand, single family homes significantly decrease population density and therefore reduce the economic viability of public transit. Remaining mobile becomes an increasing challenge since most single family residences are too far away from transit stops, grocery stores, medical facilities, etc. Single family homes are rarely equipped to accommodate the mobility demands of older persons due to narrow staircases, lack of grab bars and ramps. Seniors living alone in their homes are also more likely to feel isolated and as a result are at higher risk of physical and financial abuse.

From a planning and public policy perspective, there is hence a need to focus on a variety of affordable housing (small condominiums, apartments, townhouses and co-housing arrangements) that is near public transportation, shopping, recreation and medical facilities.

The following map (Map 1) shows homeownership among those 65 years and older in San Mateo County. Homeownership is highest in areas with high median household incomes and as comparisons with other counties show, homeownership is generally high in the county.

**San Mateo County Department of Housing** provides a range of services and programs to help very low, low and moderate income residents with rental and housing assistance.

Among other things, it maintains an affordable housing list, provides a search engine for affordable housing, and has published a brochure “Building for the Boom: Creating Communities that Work for All Generations” in 2009. It contains practical recommendations for increasing the stock of housing in the cities across the county that meets the needs of a growing older population.

For more information, visit [www.smchousing.org](http://www.smchousing.org)

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4.2 Transportation, mobility and transit- and senior-oriented development

According to the California High-Speed Rail Authority, the demand for housing near transit stops is expected to grow by 25 percent between 2000 and 2030.\(^2\) Since surveys revealed that Baby Boomers are more likely to want to age in communities in close proximity to public transit options, their special characteristics and needs must be accommodated as well in transit-rich neighborhoods and through Transit-Oriented Development (TOD).

The El Camino Real corridor is one of the main north-south arteries in the county and rich in both residential as well as commercial and industrial areas. El Camino Real also cuts through nearly all of the 20 cities in the county and therefore lends itself perfectly to joint and coordinated planning and development. For example, if the cities who share the El Camino Real corridor prioritize their housing development to create a density of 40 or more units per acre, then the county as a whole will not only meet its necessary housing development\(^3\) but will do so in a way that further promotes the viability of public transit, increases mixed-use development and grows the kind of multi-age, multi-cultural neighborhood that Baby Boomers are seeking and that facilitates healthy aging in place. In particular, such development would allow the creation of a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system with many and frequent stops between San Francisco County in the North and Santa Clara County in the South.\(^4\)

San Mateo County’s 21 Elements Initiative\(^5\) encourages all cities in the county to re-design its housing policies to focus on TOD and the City and County Association of Governments (C/CAG) has created a TOD incentive program. Both initiatives can help meet the projected increase in TOD demand within the next 10-20 years.

### Grand Boulevard Initiative (GBI)

The Grand Boulevard is a collaboration of 19 cities, San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, and local and regional agencies united to improve the performance, safety and aesthetics of El Camino Real. The vision of the initiative is that El Camino Real will achieve its full potential as a place for residents to work, live, shop and play, creating links between communities that promote walking and transit and an improved and meaningful quality of life.

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[www.grandboulevard.net/initiative.html](http://www.grandboulevard.net/initiative.html)

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\(^3\) San Mateo County Health System, Health Planning and Policy. (2010). Maintaining the Health of an Aging San Mateo County, pp.4-5.

\(^4\) Ibid, p.5.

\(^5\) For more information, visit [http://www.21elements.com/](http://www.21elements.com/).
For many older adults, walking a quarter mile is feasible, if streets and neighborhoods are safe. As the next map illustrates, 53 percent (51,000 seniors) of the current senior population lives within a quarter mile of a public transit stop and 73 (69,900 seniors) percent live within a half a mile. Transit access is most readily available in the Northern part of the county and in the central areas along the El Camino Real corridor. Hillsborough, Eastern Menlo Park and large portions of Atherton, Woodside and Portola Valley have very limited access to public transit.

Since many older adults desire to live in diverse, affordable neighborhoods that are close to transit and amenities, and as the county and cities are implementing TOD projects, the share of seniors who can walk to public transportation stops is likely to increase further.

Older adults living in senior living facilities are often particularly dependent on public transportation or others to drive them. Map 3 looks at the accessibility of public transportation in the vicinity of senior living facilities. The results show that these facilities are generally served by at least one mode of transportation within a short distance. In addition, SamTrans provides paratransit options for persons with disabilities who cannot independently use regular bus service some or all of the time. The San Mateo County Transit District provides paratransit using Redi-Wheels on the bayside of the county and RediCoast on the coastside. Trips must be prearranged.6

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Map 2: Distribution of the senior population and public transit stops in San Mateo County. Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2011, 1-year estimates. Note: the distances were calculated using spatial mapping software and are based on census tract centroids and road information.
4.3 Access to Healthy Food Choices

Healthy aging requires not only walkable neighborhoods and easy access to transportation and medical services, but also a diversity of healthy food options. Since supermarkets and other food retailers offering fresh fruit and produce are often located in population-dense areas, it can be challenging for seniors living farther away from these areas to have access to healthy foods. The Retail Food Environment Index is a measure that gauges the relative availability of healthy food choices compared to fast food outlets.

As the map shows, fast food restaurants and convenience stores – which are less likely to offer fresh, healthy food options – are abundant throughout most of San Mateo County. No RFEI is available for Hillsborough and Atherton, which – together with Portola Valley, Woodside and Millbrae – have the highest shares of seniors.

Farmers’ markets offer a range of benefits to farmers, consumers and communities as well as the environment.

Consumer benefits include:

- Their location often reduces the need for driving, parking, etc
- The opportunity to buy fresher, seasonal and healthier foods
- Greater variety
- More locally produced foods and varieties, e.g., organic foods, pasture-raised meats, free-range eggs and poultry, handmade farmstead cheeses, heirloom produce heritage breeds of meat and many less transport-immune cultivars disfavored by large grocers

Among the community benefits are:

- Farmers' markets help maintain important social ties, linking rural and urban populations and even close neighbors in mutually rewarding exchange.
- Market traffic generates traffic for nearby businesses
- A place to meet neighbors, chat, etc.
- A place to enjoy an outdoor walk while getting needed groceries

Increasing the number of farmers markets can thus help older persons eat healthier, connect with friends and neighbors, and stay physically active.

Nearly every city in San Mateo County has a farmers market. To obtain information on their location and times of operation, please visit

http://www.co.sanmateo.ca.us/ and search for Farmers’ Markets.
Map 4: Retail Food Environment Index in San Mateo County’s cities and senior population density. Source: Get Healthy San Mateo County, City Health Profiles 2011 and US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2011, 1-year estimates.
4.4 Access to Parks and Open Space

Outdoor activities are an excellent way to stay healthy and fit. Regular physical activity helps to prevent serious injuries from falls and also promotes mental health. San Mateo County is densely populated but still has approximately 80 percent of unincorporated land. Both the cities and the county maintain a diversity of parks and open spaces for residents. The next map shows the areas in San Mateo County that are within a quarter and half a mile to a park and open space.

The darker green colors reflect walking distances to a park or open space of up to ¼ mile, while the lighter green areas measure distances of up to ½ mile. These distances correspond to approximately 5 and 10 minute walking times for an able-bodied person and can be used to estimate the accessibility of parks and open space by seniors.

As the map shows, the densely populated parts of San Mateo County generally have good access to outdoor recreation spaces with the exception of Brisbane, parts of Foster City, Pacifica, South San Francisco and Menlo Park. The large properties found in Woodside, Atherton and Portola Valley make up for the lack in public parks and open spaces.

Overall, 40 percent of all seniors living in San Mateo County live within a half mile of parks and open spaces and 10 percent live within a quarter mile. More seniors aged 75 years and older live within a half mile from a park or open space (42 percent compared to 38 percent of all 65-74 year olds) (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Estimated number of people within ½ mile of park or open space</th>
<th>Percentage of seniors in given age group living within ½ mile of park or open space</th>
<th>Estimated number of people within ¼ mile of park or open space</th>
<th>Percentage of seniors in given age group living within ¼ mile of park or open space</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>65-74 yrs</td>
<td>19,129</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>4,683</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75+</td>
<td>19,486</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>4,838</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All seniors</td>
<td>38,608</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>9,521</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Seniors living within walking distance to a park or open space by age group and distance.

Many cities in the county have set themselves goals to increase the area and usability of parks and open spaces for their residents. Pacifica has the most acres of city-owned parks per 1,000 residents (14.6), followed by Brisbane (12.2) and Menlo Park (10.0). Hillsborough (0.2), Half Moon Bay (0.7) and Woodside (1.1) have the least amount of park area per 1,000 residents.

San Mateo County increased its parks from 14,149 acres in 2000 to 16,043 acres in 2010 (13 percent increase). However, multi-year budget cuts also threaten the planned acquisition of property and regional trail improvements in the county.
4.5 Integration of Seniors into Local Communities

Seniors are an important part of every community. Their growing share means that that the contributions seniors make to our communities, culture and economy are also poised to grow. Involving seniors in community life, through volunteer opportunities, extended labor force participation and through other forms of interaction requires good knowledge of where seniors live and what their expectations and preferences are as they age.

The following collection of maps gives a snapshot of the current senior population in San Mateo County by age, race/ethnicity, mobility status, income and whether they are likely to live alone.

Map 6 shows the share of seniors, age 65 and older, in the total population by census tract in San Mateo County. Census tracts with at least 20 percent senior residents include South Half Moon Bay, Hillsborough, Atherton, Portola Valley, Woodside, Millbrae, and parts of Burlingame, Pacifica, San Bruno and Daly City. Smaller percentages of seniors live in East Palo Alto, Menlo Park and along the El Camino Real corridor of Belmont, San Carlos and Redwood City.

Maps Map 7 and Map 8 show the share of seniors by age group in the total population. They indicate that older seniors tend to live closer to the North-South corridor of El Camino Real while younger seniors are more spread out across the entire county, with significant shares along the coast and Bay.

Maps Map 9 to Map 12 show the distribution of seniors by race and ethnicity in San Mateo County. Black/African American seniors are concentrated in urban parts along the peninsula, especially in East Palo Alto, Menlo Park and parts of San Mateo. Asian and Pacific Islander seniors are more concentrated in the Northern part of the county. Hispanic/Latino seniors make up a growing share of the total senior population in the county (10.9 percent in 2010) and are widely dispersed. Many of them live in Menlo Park, North Fair Oaks, parts of San Carlos, San Mateo, Belmont and the Northern part of the county, including Millbrae, San Bruno, South San Francisco and Daly City. The Southern part of Half Moon Bay also has a larger number of Hispanic/Latino seniors.

Map 13 depicts the percentage of new senior residents, age 65 and older, that moved from within the county or from a different county to this San Mateo County census tract in the 12-months preceding the American Community Survey 2011. Senior citizens have moved inland to the Southern portion of the county, along the San Francisco Bay. However, in the Northern part of San Mateo County seniors settled on the Western coast along the Pacific Ocean.

Map 14 shows the number of men and women, age 65 and older, who have incomes below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) in 2010. Larger circles represent more seniors with incomes below the FPL. Comparing senior men and women, the data indicate that women overall are more likely to have incomes below the FPL and that they are concentrated in Foster City and South San Francisco. The number of men with incomes below the FPL is highest in East Palo Alto and South San Francisco.

Lastly, Map 15 shows the percentage of all seniors, age 65 and older, who are likely to live alone. Shown are the percent of seniors who have never married, are now married but the spouse is absent, who are widowed or divorced. The census tracts with the highest percentage of seniors falling into these categories are located in Burlingame, Menlo Park, Redwood City and San Bruno.
Map 15: Distribution of seniors who are likely to be living alone in San Mateo County. Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2011, 1-year estimates.