

Health Impact Assessment (HIA) of Atlanta Regional Plan 2040

Plan 2040, the long-term regional comprehensive plan being prepared for the Atlanta metropolitan region by the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC), may affect as many as 8 million residents and countless visitors to the Atlanta region over the next 30 years. Additionally, this plan is the region's opportunity to prepare for increasing challenges and growing diversities in the 20-county region. These include diversity of urban form and function present in the built environment – ranging from dense urban settlements to successive rings of suburbs to sparsely populated rural and ex-urban areas and demographic diversity by race/ethnicity, age, income, and health status, to name a few. The long term health, sustainability, and prosperity of the region will likely be influenced by Plan 2040.

Spatial distances between development may be significant to health. Your family's health can be affected by the accessibility and affordability of daily needs such as housing, employment centers, and service and retail locations. At the regional scale, this can promote opportunity and a sense of community in some neighborhoods and not others, leading to socioeconomic and health disparities and allowing crime to spread in the under-served areas. Another potential pathway for health impacts is through transportation. Active transportation (walking, bicycling, using a manual wheelchair, and other travel modes that require energy expenditure by the traveler) is a form of physical activity, and increased levels of physical activity appear to prevent numerous chronic diseases. Additionally, urban forms associated with low levels of active transportation (and high levels of private motor vehicle travel) have been associated with higher rates of traffic injuries and fatalities, emotional stress, and demand on public services.

Plan 2040 is also designed to assess air quality issues for the entire 20-county Atlanta region. In addition, both transportation and land use have been shown to affect emission levels. Air pollution, in turn, is linked with many diseases, such as asthma, lower respiratory disease, and heart disease. Transportation and land use are also associated with greenhouse gas emissions, which appear to be a major contributing factor in manmade climate change. All levels of Plan 2040 have the potential to impact health through air quality. While land use and transportation are linked to health and well-being, their connections are not thoroughly understood. The planning and public involvement processes themselves may affect such results. Health Impact Assessment, or HIA, will allow researchers to judge these potential effects on health, and the distribution of those effects, and to develop an impact management strategy. A successful, replicable HIA framework for regional transportation and land use planning could be adopted for metropolitan areas nationwide, and could guide future regional planning efforts.

About Health Impact Assessment

HIA is “a combination of procedures, methods, and tools by which a policy, program, or project may be judged as to its potential effects on the health of a population, and the distribution of those effects within the population”. The final product of an HIA is a set of evidence-based recommendations intended to inform decision-makers and the general public about the health-related issues associated with the project. The recommendations provide practical solutions that seek to magnify positive health impacts, and remove or minimize negative impacts.

Assessment methods follow six basic steps: screening to determine justification of the HIA as a demonstration project, scoping to outline the possible consequences and benefits and identify the boundaries for appraisal, appraisal characterizing the nature and magnitude of both harmful and



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beneficial impacts, making recommendations for impact management, dissemination of the recommendations to all stakeholders, and monitoring and evaluation to determine the effectiveness of the HIA and identify process improvement opportunities.

Examples of Health Impact Assessment

Atlanta BeltLine Health Impact Assessment: In 2005, CQGRD began a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) of the BeltLine with technical assistance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The goal of the BeltLine HIA was to guide planning decisions by predicting health consequences, sharing knowledge about healthy community development, and providing realistic recommendations to prevent or mitigate negative health outcomes. We learned that the BeltLine would benefit the health of residents and users in many ways. The final report contained several important recommendations informing policy-makers on how to capitalize on these benefits in all aspects of the planning and implementation of the BeltLine, and to make sure they were available to all. Recommendations prioritized certain projects and provided strategies for equitable access and development, environmental hazard management, and ways to promote the healthful aspects of the BeltLine. Since its release, the HIA report has helped attract funding, stimulate inter-agency collaboration, enhance the federal environmental impact process, and build community support.

City of Decatur, GA Community Transportation Plan and Rapid HIA: The City of Decatur, GA sought guidance in developing a Community Transportation Plan (CTP) that would promote healthy communities and economic development using the principles of active living. CQGRD, with Sycamore Consulting, Inc. and Kimley-Horn and Associates, used Health Impact Assessment to achieve Decatur's vision. CQGRD used innovative tools to integrate transportation planning with the health impact assessment. The CTP was completed in fall 2007 with broad support from city staff and residents. It provided clear guidance on project prioritization, design guidelines, and expected benefits. Decatur is already using the plan to realize their goals – smoothing the implementation process and supporting their request for SPLOST funding. Decatur has also created a new Active Living Division within the Department of Community and Economic Development to combine health and quality of life gains with sustainability, transportation options, and a stronger sense of community.

What Does the HIA Mean for Plan 2040 and Metropolitan Atlanta?

CQGRD hopes that ARC officials, staff, and regional community members will be actively involved throughout the HIA process. Ideally, the final recommendations will reflect the needs and wishes of the Atlanta metropolitan region, and will provide guidance for achieving them. Researchers may also request assistance from ARC staff, in order to better understand Plan 2040.

The ARC should expect to see the same advantages as our previous HIA partners. The HIA may identify opportunities for the region to maximize the benefit of Plan 2040 to residents and the business community, and strategies to mitigate potential burdens. The HIA can also serve as an innovative part of the region's planning process, generating cost-neutral or cost-benefit positive strategies for Metropolitan Atlanta to be a healthy, thriving region.