Walkable Communities Aim of UC Riverside, Community Collaboration

UCR researchers participating in $250,000 grant to develop walkability plans for two Riverside neighborhoods

By Bettye Miller on MAY 8, 2013  UCR TODAY

RIVERSIDE, Calif. — Researchers at the University of California, Riverside and the Riverside County Transportation Commission (RCTC) have partnered in a study aimed at making two established Riverside neighborhoods more walkable and less reliant on cars for shopping and other activities.

UCR’s Center for Sustainable Suburban Development (CSSD) will receive $227,000 of a $250,000 grant the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) awarded to RCTC for the project. University researchers will work with the transportation commission and the Riverside County Department of Public Health to produce walkability plans for the Ramona and Arlington neighborhoods.

Walkability plans follow the concept of new urbanism, a form of development that improves public health through planning and urban design by integrating shopping and housing in a pedestrian-friendly environment. Increasing walkability helps reduce automobile usage. These plans can include many facets of new urbanism, including usable public transit, wider sidewalks, reduced or slowed vehicular traffic, and local investment to integrate businesses into neighborhoods.

“Ideally, the plan we develop will demonstrate the best way to move from a traditional suburban neighborhood to a sustainable one and will become the template for other communities,” said Juliann Allison, associate professor of political science, CSSD associate director and principal investigator for the center’s portion of the project.

UCR’s Bourns College of Engineering Center for Environmental Research and Technology will collaborate on the traffic analysis component of the project, she said.

“California generally is doing a good job of working with new communities, but has not had a lot of success working with older communities to make them more sustainable,” said Allison, whose research in the last decade has focused on urban planning issues. “Both the Ramona and Arlington neighborhoods are close to existing transit lines that provide access to shopping. You can imagine zoning changes that will better integrate commercial and residential uses. The idea is to encourage designs that promote walking and bicycling and less reliance on cars.”
Under the two-year grant, an analysis of each neighborhood will examine traffic modeling; neighborhood infrastructure; parks, streets and other common areas; and social capital, such as local powerbrokers, social clubs and schools. The goal is to increase positive health indicators in a measurable way, increase public participation in neighborhood planning, and produce a lasting policy document that can be incorporated as local planning policy.

Results of the neighborhood analyses will be used for a series of meetings between neighborhood residents, city officials and staff to develop a five-year improvement plan for each neighborhood and to seek the plan’s adoption by the city of Riverside.

The Center for Sustainable Suburban Development has partnered with community entities in the past, including a project with Caltrans to encourage children in the Coachella Valley to walk to school and another with the California Energy Commission that recommended the development of smaller, regional power plants rather than a few large facilities. Allison also has advised developers on ways to make their projects more walkable and sustainable.

“UC Riverside is committed to such community-based research,” Allison added. “This is consistent with the strategic plan for the university, to demonstrate that our research has an impact on the community. We want to respond directly to issues the community has raised.”