

Study: Public health often ignored in transportation projects ^[1]

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By **David Kelly** | *CU Denver*

A new study from the University of Colorado Denver shows public health issues are often ignored in many transportation projects, especially when major roads are built through lower-income neighborhoods.

Air pollution, crime and numerous traffic hazards, the study said, point to a serious and persistent gap between public health and planning.

“The public health effects of heavy traffic are broad,” said study author Carolyn McAndrews, PhD, assistant professor at the CU Denver College of Architecture and Planning, one of the largest schools of its kind in the U.S. “Studies have found associations between high-traffic roads and high mortality rates, lung cancer, cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, poor

birth outcomes and traffic-related injuries.”

McAndrews said that since many neighborhoods along these major roads tend to be non-white and poor, it was time to start viewing this as a social justice issue.

“In my classes I encourage future transportation planners to think of ways planning can improve community health,” she said. “This is something that designers love to do if you give them the chance.”

Her study, published this month in the Journal of Planning Education and Research, focused on busy Verona Road near Madison, WI which carries 50,000 to 60,000 vehicles a day, 10 percent of which are heavy trucks. Similar roads exist throughout the country.

Verona Rd. connects Iowa to northeastern Wisconsin, passing through smaller cities before crossing into southwest Madison, the specific area of study.

The neighborhood is home to about 2,500 people, many of them lower income. Households in the poorest areas earn less than \$15,000 a year and 90 percent of residents are minorities. Some 20 percent don’t own a vehicle. At the same time, the neighborhood has a number of community-led organizations and county and city-based programs.

McAndrews found Verona Rd. posed numerous hazards. Not only was walking across it dangerous, it also suffered from blight, crime and pollution.

Residents mobilized and won some changes, including bicycle crossings and a pedestrian bridge, but whenever their goals clashed with the Department of Transportation’s mobility objectives, their concerns were dismissed.

“For instance, the Department of Transportation did not consider installing sound walls until a newly elected mayor insisted nor did it accept an offer from the state Department of Natural Resources to conduct air quality monitoring in the corridor,” the study said.

According to McAndrews, the hazards surrounding Verona Rd. are common nationwide. Unfortunately, neighborhood concerns about the public health effects of these high-traffic roads rarely change the direction of the planning process.

McAndrews said designers should take the public health impacts of roads into consideration before construction to minimize hazards earlier rather than later when it’s more difficult to change.

Making public health a priority, she said, demonstrates the future of transportation planning and design.

“I think that kind of shift in thinking would set a new and better standard for communities across the country,” McAndrews said.

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