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El Dorado County rates its health at symposium

By Cathy Locke - Bee Staff Writer

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Quality of life is consistently cited as one of El Dorado County's greatest attractions, but when it comes to a healthy lifestyle, public health officials say local statistics reflect those nationwide.

Fifty-seven percent of county adults in 2005 were overweight or obese, compared with 56.1 percent statewide, reported Dr. Jason Eberhart-Phillips, county health officer.

According to 2003 data, 20 percent of El Dorado County teen-agers were obese, he said, and 27 percent engaged in vigorous activity less than three times a week. In 2005-06, 57 percent of fifth-graders failed to meet all six state fitness standards.

At the same time, he said, the hospitalization rate for serious automobile-related injuries in the county consistently has been higher than the state average.

"A lot of behavioral factors have at their root environmental factors," Eberhart-Phillips told health, transportation and land-use experts, as well as local housing, recreation and environmental advocates during the Symposium on Health and the Built Environment in El Dorado Hills earlier this month.

About 70 people attended the daylong session Sept. 14.

County Public Health Director Gayle Erbe-Hamlin said the gathering was designed to discuss an emerging field that focuses on connections between public health and the things people build, whether houses, schools, businesses or roads. The goal: to examine what "can be gained ... by bringing the two together."

Growing interest in the link between public health and community development is reflected in Assembly Bill 211, by Assemblyman Dave Jones, D-Sacramento, which would authorize public health officers to advise cities and counties on public health issues related to land use and transportation planning.

The symposium's keynote speaker was Dr. Richard Jackson, a UC Berkeley School of Public Health professor and former state public health officer, who said the average American has gained 10 pounds over the past decade. Excess weight and lack of physical activity, he said, contribute to a range of health problems, including diabetes, heart disease and mental disorders such as depression and anxiety.

"Sixteen percent of all dollars in America are going to medical care," he said, indicating he would rather see money spent on parks and recreational facilities to encourage physical activity. Walking 10,000 steps a day, he said, reduces the risk of diabetes by 60 percent.

Several people said physical exercise is stymied by automobile-oriented development.

"We're not walking, because the places we need to go aren't necessarily within a short walk," said Eberhart-Phillips. He said public health staff found that only 14.1 percent of the county's 75,286 residential parcels are within one mile of a supermarket, the maximum distance people might be willing to walk to buy groceries.

Even in the higher-density suburban and urban communities of El Dorado Hills, Cameron Park and Placerville, he said, only 22.4 percent of 27,990 residential parcels are within the one-mile range. In contrast, 41.9 percent of residential parcels in the "dense zones" are within one mile of a fast-food restaurant.

Several symposium participants said more needs to be done to encourage students to walk or ride

their bikes to school, or, in rural areas, to bus stops.

But walking to school often presents a challenge, Eberhart-Phillips said, citing Pleasant Grove Middle School, which opened four years ago on Green Valley Road. Although large residential developments are within 0.8 miles of the school, that stretch of Green Valley Road lacks sidewalks and bicycle lanes.

Richard Shepard, county transportation director, said the county's general plan emphasizes pedestrian and bicycle uses, adding that bike lanes will be installed along Green Valley Road.

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