



## Healthy Coastal Connections Project

### Problem Statement

Development, rapid and consuming, will soon visit the coastal areas of Mobile and Baldwin counties. As green gives way to concrete, asphalt, homes, businesses, and parking lots, the decisions made regarding land use will have far reaching impacts, both on the natural environment, and on the health of the people who live there.

The future of the children of Mobile and Baldwin counties is very much in question. Already beset by a high rate of obesity, will today's children see their environs transformed into healthy communities that can be easily walked and bicycled by all, or will they see more of the same: a sprawling, car-dependant world.

Leaving a healthy legacy for tomorrow's leaders depends on summoning the necessary political will amongst today's elected officials, planners, engineers, public health advocates, parents, junior and senior citizens, and others. This is the focus of the Healthy Coastal Connections Project.

### Supporting Evidence

Alabama has the unfortunate distinction of having the second highest rate of obesity in the nation. The economic toll on Alabamans in direct and indirect medical costs is tremendous. Overlooked and hidden is the cost exacted in human terms: shortened lifespans; financial stress on families caused by health care expenses; restricted mobility and the resultant social disconnect—these are but a few of the hidden costs. The effects are not borne equally: low-income and African-American communities, in particular, suffer the most.

In afflicted communities this crisis has been created by a combination of car-oriented community design, a lack of transportation options for children and adults, and individual lifestyles choices and options relating to nutrition and physical activity.

Children are the primary focus of the Healthy Coastal Connections Project, because the single greatest predictor of adult overweight/obesity is childhood obesity. Experience has proven that committing to the health of children will yield long term and broad reaching benefits for all.

### What can be done

Smart Coast envisions an alternate future under the Healthy Coastal Connections Project. Smart Coast sees a future in which sidewalks are included in all new developments, and older neighborhoods are improved to include pedestrian and bicycle accommodations. A future in which everyday destinations like the school, grocery store, and post office are connected by a network of sidewalks, trails, and streets to make the trip on foot and bicycle possible and convenient. Lastly, Smart Coast envisions a future in which development, be it commercial, residential, or civic, occurs in a way responsive to the area's sensitive and unique ecosystem.

### Who can help

- City and County Government
- Regional Planning Organizations
- Churches and Faith-based organizations

### Who can help- continued

- Business leaders and associations
- Developers
- Area nonprofits especially those that focus on:
  - Needs and health of children
  - Natural and built environment
  - Community life
  - Equities and disparities
- Local healthcare providers
- Advocates for bicycling and walking; and smart growth
- Groups that facilitate youth activity (e.g. YMCAs, Boys & Girls Club, PALs)
- University of Southern Alabama and other educational institutions and leaders
- National Center for Bicycling & Walking

### What we propose/Call to action

Smart Coast has partnered with The National Center for Bicycling & Walking—courtesy of a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation—to develop and implement a strategic, multi-year plan to increase walking, bicycling, and healthy living in Mobile and Baldwin counties. The plan will be developed through stakeholder consultation and community consensus.

## **HCC Project Objectives**

### Infrastructure and Planning

- Developing a region-wide plan for community trails safe and suitable for young children.
- Planning for connections between existing trails and urban sidewalk and bicycling facilities where they exist; as well as connections to and between parks, playgrounds and other areas for outdoor activity.
- Implementing policy changes that promote physical activity in comprehensive plans, pedestrian and or bicycle plans, school based travel plans, parks and recreation master plans, and capital improvement plans.

### Policies

- Supporting safe routes to school strategies focusing on policies, infrastructure safety improvements and programming to increase the number of children walking and bicycling to school and neighborhood facilities.
- Conducting an environmental scan of local polices that both encourage and promote active and healthy living.

### Advocacy and Outreach

- Creating an organized network of local advocates.
- Educating public officials and the public on the principles and benefits of complete streets and moving toward the adoption of complete street policies.
- Organizing and conducting a series of community outreach meetings to raise awareness of the connection between the built environment and public health, and to vet the Healthy Coastal Connections strategic plan.