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Title: Car crashes, obesity connected to urban sprawl in Pacific Northwest

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Urban sprawl is a major health risk for Oregonians, according to an environmental group's annual report card on the Pacific Northwest that will be issued today. Residents of low-density urban neighborhoods are more likely to die in a car crash - and more likely to be obese - than residents of denser communities in Multnomah and Washington counties, according to the report, "Cascadia Scorecard 2006: Focus on Sprawl and Health."

The report will be issued by the Sightline Institute, a Seattle advocacy group formerly known as Northwest Environment Watch.

Vancouver, British Columbia, the most compact of seven Northwest cities evaluated in the report, also showed the lowest overall rates of obesity and number of fatal car crashes.

Planning more compact communities that allow people to drive less could make the Northwest's communities safer and healthier, the report suggests.

"The report does an excellent job of providing an overview of evidence showing the relationship between designing communities and our health," said Lawrence Frank, a University of British Columbia professor whose work is referenced in the report.

Crashes cause 500 deaths each year in Oregon and are the leading cause of death in the state for residents under the age of 45.

Obesity, which leads to many chronic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension, is responsible for 1,500 deaths each year in the state.

Residents of low-density developments walk less and spend 20 percent more time, on average, in their cars than residents of walkable neighborhoods, according to studies cited in the report.

"We can definitely say there's a correlation between how much people drive and these trends (in obesity and crashes), among other reasons," said Leigh Sims, spokeswoman for the Sightline Institute.

The report suggests further studies into the impacts of transit development and urban planning on health. A health impact assessment could be completed in addition to an environmental impact statement on all new development projects, for example, to factor in the medical costs of low-density development.

The health effects of low-density neighborhoods have "huge financial implications," said Clark Williams-Derry, research director for Sightline and lead author of the report.

Car crashes may cost Northwest states approximately \$8 billion per year, or more than \$700 per resident, including medical treatments, lost productivity and wages and other costs, according to the National Safety Council. The total costs of obesity and physical inactivity may top \$11 billion per year in the Northwest states.

"Obviously Oregon has been graded on a curve for its land-use planning. We may be doing better than some places but we still have some challenges in creating healthy communities and economic development," said Evan Manvel, executive director of the Bicycle Transportation Alliance in Portland. "There are some cities doing a better job, and we can learn from those cities."

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