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The Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development
and Local Government
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

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Dear Secretary

Re: Inquiry into a New Regional Development Funding Program

The Heart Foundation commends the Committee for its inquiry into a new regional development funding program and welcomes the opportunity to make some recommendations concerning the inquiry.

Specifically, the Heart Foundation recommendations address the following elements of the inquiry's terms of reference;

- *ways to invest in genuine regional economic development and community infrastructure with the aim of enhancing the sustainability and livability of Australia's regions.*
- *advice on future funding of regional programs in order to invest in genuine and accountable community infrastructure projects.*

The Heart Foundation is very concerned at the increasing prevalence of some risk factors for cardiovascular disease, the nation's biggest killer, including overweight and obesity, physical inactivity and poor nutrition (NHFA 2007).

The importance of countering physical inactivity cannot be under-estimated. Part of the solution must lie with creating more active communities.

Local government is in a key position to drive lifestyle change through the development and promotion of the supportive environments needed to achieve this change. Of vital relevance are the synergies that can be created by funding infrastructure that will simultaneously promote health, active transport, sustainability and social cohesion.

Local government provides and maintains a substantial proportion of the nation's physical activity, walking and cycling infrastructure and yet is poorly funded to maintain, renew and expand this vital national asset.

Support for local government to drive change through its physical activity and related community infrastructure asset is critical, as is the development of capacity in local

government to design health promoting environments and funding for recurrent programs to drive increased use of the physical activity assets.

Heart Foundation Recommendations

The Heart Foundation urges the Committee to adopt recommendations that ensure that future community infrastructure programs have, as a core component, a strong focus on building and encouraging active, health promoting communities. The rise in prevalence of chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease, requires a whole-of-government approach to be adopted. The role of the community infrastructure is critical to achieving a more active, healthy and productive population.

The Heart Foundation makes the following recommendations:

1. The Australian Government must provide sustained and substantial funding to all local government authorities, including Indigenous community councils, to assist them to:
 - Renew, upgrade and maintain existing physical activity and related community infrastructure such as footpaths, quality open space, shelter, lighting, cycling, sport and recreation infrastructure to enable community use and access across the age-range;
 - Build new physical activity and related community infrastructure;
 - Build council capacity to plan and develop more active communities, employing and training planners in 'healthy by design' concepts and principles;
 - Encourage greater community use of physical activity infrastructure by allowing recurrent funding for programs that encourage use of this infrastructure, such as walking and cycling programs using council walking trails or bike paths, or swimming programs that achieve higher utilisation rates of council owned swimming pools.
2. Preventive health/physical activity experts should be included in peak management boards and/or advisory bodies that may be established to manage the infrastructure programs, such as the Australian Governments Regional and Local Government Community Infrastructure Program.
3. Funding for the proposed Regional and Local Government Community Infrastructure Program should be made available to all councils, including a core component for all councils, with additional funds allocated to assist councils with greater socio-economic and demographic challenges.
4. The Local Government and Planning Ministers Council should endorse, embrace and assist widespread implementation of the "Healthy Places and Spaces" project, which will support urban environment and other professionals to design, assess and support communities by provision of the most appropriate infrastructure.
5. The Australian Government should ensure that its infrastructure initiatives, including the Regional and Local Government Community Infrastructure Program, Infrastructure Australia and the Building Australia Fund, are

informed by expert preventive health advice to ensure outcomes that will meet not only Australia's economic needs, but also health and social priorities.

1. The obesity and physical activity challenge

Australia's adult obesity rate is the fifth highest among OECD countries, behind the United States, Mexico, the United Kingdom and Greece (OECD 2007). Recent conservative estimates based on Australian data indicate that life expectancy at age 20 is about one year less among overweight Australian adults compared with Australians within the healthy weight range, while life expectancy is reduced by an average of around four years for obese Australian adults (Holman & Smith 2008). For Australian children, it has been estimated that if current obesity trends continue, the life expectancy for children alive now will fall two years by the time they are 20 years old (Holman & Smith 2008). The results are particularly compelling given that life expectancy is otherwise increasing for healthy Australians (Holman & Smith 2008).

Lack of sufficient physical activity is an important factor in rising rates of overweight and obesity. Physical inactivity is also associated with an increased risk of ill health and death. This is particularly true for cardiovascular disease. There is compelling evidence to show that 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on most, if not all, days of the week reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease (NHFA 2001). Physical activity has an important role in blood pressure, blood cholesterol and weight management, as well as promoting mental health. Increases in weight are associated with increased risk of cardiovascular and many other chronic diseases.

Thirty minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity (eg brisk walking) on most (preferably all) days of the week confers important health benefits for all individuals, regardless of body weight and shape. Children need at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day and should restrict their use of electronic recreational media to less than two hours a day (Saris et al. 2003).

Research published in 2007 by Medibank Private estimated that if more Australians were physically active for just 30 minutes a day the Australian health care system could save \$1.5 billion annually (Medibank Private 2007).

These new scientific findings represent very challenging changes in lifestyle behaviours for the vast majority of Australians and they simply will not happen without some external help for families and individuals. Behavioural change towards a more active lifestyle needs to happen in part without people being aware of any deliberate effort. In other words, we need a supportive environmental strategy which puts activity back into the Australian lifestyle 'by design'.

2. Supportive Environments for Physical Activity

There are good policy precedents and encouraging research findings on the links between environment and physical activity (Costanza et al. 2007; Frank et al. 2007). The Heart Foundation recognised this and in 2004 published *Healthy by Design: a planner's guide to environments for active living*. Research both worldwide and commissioned by the Heart Foundation has continued to build an evidence base on the key factors in the built environment that support people incorporating physical activity into their lives. Most of this infrastructure is designed, assessed, built or maintained by local governments, often against a background of budgetary constraints. Key factors in a supportive physical environment include:

2.1 Walking and cycling routes: People who have access to safe places to be active and neighbourhoods that are walkable are likely to be more active (Sallis & Glanz 2006). The need for improved bicycle infrastructure has been recognised as a barrier to people cycling for both recreation and active transport purposes (Bauman et al 2008). Councils need funding to build and maintain footpaths, shared use paths, on-road cycling facilities, pedestrian/cycle crossings and to connect disjointed paths and destinations.

In the past decade, there has been a rapid decline in children walking or cycling to school and few adults participate in walking or cycling as a mode of transport. Priority should be given to walking and cycling access around schools. The infrastructure should be complemented by programs and education initiatives such as 'safe routes to schools', 'Make Tracks 2 School' and bicycle education. These initiatives will help reintegrate physical activity and active transport back into people's lives.

2.2 Living streets: People who live in more walkable, pedestrian friendly neighbourhoods with reduced exposure to traffic are more likely to walk (Carver et al. 2005). A key to more walking and cycling is the design of suburbs and providing a streetscape with amenity and safety. Local governments can provide this by only permitting subdivisions with a permeable layout, reducing and slowing traffic, providing safe crossings, and maintaining streetscapes designed to provide amenity and reduce crime.

2.3 Local Destinations: Having destinations close by is strongly correlated with walking and cycling. A number of reviews have shown that access to neighbourhoods characterised by higher density, mixed-use zoning, interconnected streets and access to public transport, increases walking (McCormack et al. 2004; Owen et al. 2004). Local councils can assist with this by supporting appropriate mixed use zones, providing community facilities that are accessible by walking and cycling, and requiring end of trip facilities at shopping centres and parks such as convenient cycle/gopher parking, drinking fountains, dog walk bags/drinking bowls and public toilets.

2.4 Open Space: There is also reasonably strong evidence of an association between parks and open spaces and walking. Having access to public open spaces is associated with walking as a form of transportation and achieving recommended levels of walking; it also appears necessary to have good communication and promotion of available facilities – access alone does not guarantee improved outcomes (Giles-Corti & Donovan 2002; Giles-Corti & Donovan 2003). Spaces that encourage active recreation suitable for all ages, that have shade, shelter, drinking fountains, dog walking facilities, and have good natural surveillance are considered to be quality open spaces. The quality of open space is important to its successful use and the cost of maintenance of high quality open space is often an impediment to local governments.

2.5 Public Transport: Public transport services connect people with places. Although not directly provided by local governments the quality of infrastructure around public transport encourages its use and precipitates active modes of transport getting to and from stops. Providing clear, well lit, attractive stops with shelter and providing road crossings to access stops all contribute to the attractiveness of using public transport over the private vehicle.

2.6 Fostering community spirit: Healthy environments that support active living take a broad view of health and seek ways to develop or harness community resources to improve health status and quality of life. Community and neighbourhood

environments impact on local walking, cycling and public transport use as well as recreational physical activity. Creating more 'liveable' neighbourhoods has the potential to produce significant sustainability benefits by reducing car use, by improving access to local services and through more efficient land use (Gebel et al. 2005). Involving the community in planning physical activity, walking and cycling routes can promote community confidence and enthusiasm for physical activity.

3. Economic, Social and Environmental benefits of supporting health infrastructure

Increasing walking, cycling and public transport use is consistent with government sustainability objectives to reduce automobile dependence and its associated environmental problems (including air and noise pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, energy and sprawl); economic impacts (such as the high costs of passenger transport and infrastructure and congestion); and social problems (including road rage, loss of public safety and community and poor transport choice for disadvantaged or vulnerable groups).

The Heart Foundation is developing a *Blueprint for an Active Australia* that will outline a comprehensive set of actions to address population inactivity. To address the major issues of population inactivity and obesity will require a combination of educational, media, environmental and program approaches, sustained over time. The Blueprint will be a useful guide for policymakers.

4. Health Places and Spaces project

The Commonwealth Government is now recognising the importance of supportive built environments for physical activity and is funding the Australian Local Government Association, the Heart Foundation and the Planning Institute of Australia on the Healthy Spaces and Places project. This project will eventually lead to resources for built environment professionals to design, assess, and integrate into Council plans, supportive environments for physical activity. It is vital that ongoing support is provided to see this program fully implemented.

Summary

The Heart Foundation urges the committee to ensure that local government and community infrastructure programs include a strong focus on promoting healthy, active communities.

Yours sincerely



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