Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez to Address New Partners for Smart Growth Conference: The speaker of the California State Assembly and the third most powerful elected official in the State will be addressing a plenary session at the upcoming New Partners for Smart Growth Conference, February 10-12 in Los Angeles. He will be addressing the what and the why of his groundbreaking global warming legislation, now a model for the rest of the nation.

The New Partners conference is coming up fast! By all accounts, this event looks to be our largest ever — with over 95 sessions and 300 speakers over the course of three full days. The conference registration rates go up after January 26th, so don’t wait to get signed up! The Westin Bonaventure (the host hotel) is already sold out. The Wilshire Grand Hotel is just two blocks from the Westin, and is honoring the reduced group room rates for the conference ($110 per night). Call 888-773-2888 and indicate you are attending the New Partners Conference. Visit www.NewPartners.org to register on-line and get more details on the exciting sessions and tours! See you in Los Angeles!

Healthy Eating and Active Living — The Local Government Role: Obesity, one of the primary causes of poor health today, is preventable. Being overweight is an underlying cause of asthma, cancer, diabetes, heart disease, stroke and other serious health problems. In 2000, the total costs of the obesity epidemic nationwide were approximately $117 billion.

Experts have concluded that the dramatic increase in obesity rates in recent years is a result of the environment in which we live. Our auto-oriented communities keep people from incorporating physical activity in their daily lives. And convenient access to unhealthy foods, particularly in low-income communities and schools, encourages high calorie diets that have little nutritional content. In the last 30 years, the number of calories people consume in the U.S. has increased across the entire population, but physical activity has not.

To avoid weight gain, calories consumed must equal calories burned. However, the environment in which many find themselves today does not support balancing this equation. While the LGC has focused attention on helping our members design and build communities that allow residents to walk to many destinations, there are steps that local governments can also take to accommodate healthy eating.

Food access problems are particularly serious in low-income communities. These neighborhoods tend to have the highest rates of obesity, yet residents have few opportunities to conveniently purchase nutritious, affordable food.

Food access is also a concern when it comes to children. Obese children are facing a lifetime of debilitating illnesses. Yet today, many children get much of their food in or around school or from vending machines and, surprisingly, healthy food is not often found in these places.

Local governments do have strategies and policies that can be used to level the food playing field. For instance, land use and transportation decisions ultimately can determine how easy or hard it is for neighborhood residents to easily secure affordable, healthy food. Other options for making healthy foods more accessible include supporting farmers markets and community gardens, luring supermarket development to underserved areas, enacting food-centered zoning ordinances, and providing healthy food options in vending machines.

Farmers Markets: Local governments have designated public land for markets, including parks and parking lots. The City of Davis built a permanent structure in a park to serve as the rain-or-shine location of a twice-weekly farmers market. The City of San Luis Obispo blocks off six city blocks downtown every week for Thursday evening farmers market.

Some communities actively promote their local farmers market. In Southern California, the market manager of the Santa Monica Farmers Market airs a live radio broadcast every Saturday. The program, called The Market Report, reviews fresh produce available that week.

Others communities have come up with a strategy that goes a long way toward facilitating the purchase of healthy food by low-income populations — they make sure that food stamps can be used to make purchases. The City of San Francisco, for instance, has worked with the State of California to enable food stamp recipients to use Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) payments at the community’s farmers markets. And Reno, NV provides group transportation...
to the city's farmers market for older residents.

Kaiser Permanente is now hosting farmers markets in the parking lots of medical centers and clinics in six states to assure that patients have access to affordable, healthy foods. Based on this model, cities and counties might consider making a farmers market a condition of approval for the construction of health care facilities, discount retail stores, and other buildings that low-income people may frequent.

Community Gardens: A community garden provides a twofer: Fresh, affordable food in the family diet and exercise. Studies have shown that gardening can reduce stress, fear, anger, blood pressure, and muscle tension. And some have noticed another benefit — reduced crime due to increased surveillance by residents.

The City of Seattle, working with the nonprofit P-Patch Trust, provides community garden space for residents of 44 Seattle neighborhoods. Over 1,900 plots serve more than 4,600 gardeners on 12 acres of land. There are programs to serve low-income, disabled, youth and non-English speaking populations. And P-Patch gardeners donate 7 to 10 tons of produce to Seattle food banks every year.

The long-term viability of community gardens can be protected by using zoning or other regulatory tools that designate specific lands for certain uses. In the early 1990s, the City of Boston updated its zoning ordinances to include community gardens and other types of open space, thereby limiting the types of development that can occur on these lands.

Zoning Out Fast Foods, Zoning in Healthy Ones: In California, the City of Arcata’s ordinance eliminating fast food establishments surrounding the community’s high school and limiting the number of fast food restaurants elsewhere in the city has gained national attention.

Newport, Rhode Island allows regular restaurants to locate in every commercial district in the City, but fast food restaurants are allowed only in 4 of the 5 commercial districts, and then only with a special-use permit. The City of Berkeley also limits the number of fast food restaurants elsewhere in the city in order to gain national attention.

Locating Grocery Stores Where They Are Needed: Often, fresh fruits and vegetables are unavailable in low-income neighborhoods. Because the only convenient sources of food are fast food restaurants, obesity is a particular problem among these populations.

The City of Fresno helped make healthy and affordable food available to low-income residents of a West Fresno neighborhood. Corner stores in the area were charging high prices for a limited food selection so the City rezoned a site in the neighborhood for a grocery store and negotiated with local property owners to secure it. Funds to assist the development of the market were obtained through the redevelopment agency. A police sub-station was added to the store to assure that residents would be able to shop safely. The market opened 7 years ago and continues to provide a good selection of high quality, affordable produce and other healthy foods. A health education store, a locally owned Mexican restaurant, and other retail outlets now surround the supermarket.

Vending Machine Policies: Local jurisdictions can specify the types of foods sold in vending machines and concession stands located in local government facilities through contracts between the local government and vending companies. For example, a community might require that water or juice be offered in the machines. California’s Contra Costa County Public Health Services Department developed a policy that provides guidelines for foods and beverages sold in vending machines in any facility owned, leased or operated by the county.

Teaming Up With Schools: The food, as well as the physical activity that children get while at school will influence their activity and eating habits for life. Schools can do a great deal to address childhood obesity including providing healthy food in vending machines, serving fresh fruits and vegetables in the cafeteria, providing community gardens, and facilitating physical activity before, during, and after school. Some cities have “two by two” meetings with council members and school board members where cooperative programs implementing the above policies can be initiated and nurtured.

Food Policy Councils: Food policy councils bring together disparate private and public groups to work together on goals ranging from economic development to agricultural preservation. They insure efficiency by accommodating collaboration and coordination between different departments and people. In recent years, state and local governments throughout the country have established food policy councils.

The Oakland City Council has recently approved $50,000 in seed funding for an Oakland Food Policy Council charged with helping Oakland become the country’s most sustainable city. The Council will be tasked with recommending and advocating policies and programs to the Oakland City Council that will eliminate the root-causes of hunger; increase the number of food-sector, living wage jobs; and help create a sustainable and localized food system where up to 30% of Oakland’s food is grown locally.

For more info, a free document recently completed by the ICMA titled, Community Health and Food Access: The Local Government Role is available online at www.icma.org/activeliving.