Widespread concern about the obesity epidemic has put research on physical activity into a public policy spotlight. Congress, state legislatures, and city councils are all considering measures designed to help create environments that reduce the risk of obesity. While the majority of these actions to date have centered on nutritional issues, many measures to encourage physical activity are also under consideration. In the first half of 2005, at least 18 state legislatures considered bills designed to increase access to walking and bicycling, and many have considered other environmental initiatives to increase active living. A survey of local governments by the International City/County Management Association found that 86% had introduced or were considering initiatives linking bicycling, walking, community design, and health. Lawmakers and agency officials are all clamoring for research that tells them what works.

“Research can be an incredible catalyst to expediting change,” according to Ron Sims, Executive of King County, in Washington. “Research that is very well done can bring about an incredible momentum for change.” King County, which encompasses Seattle and surrounding communities, is involved in one of the most ambitious efforts nationwide to use rigorous research results to pin down the impact of transportation and land use on travel behavior, air quality, and health. Yet the experience of Sims and other elected officials has led them to believe that researchers need to better understand the world in which policy makers operate. If researchers want to ensure that their work makes a difference, they need to conduct research that answers the questions that policy makers are asking, then go the extra mile to ensure that their research results are accessible—and, if appropriate, then point in a clear policy direction.

Executive Sims and policy makers from the federal, state, and local levels shared their views at a panel convened at the 2005 Active Living Research annual conference to discuss the research that policy makers need—and how to deliver it to them. This article reports the key themes articulated by the panel,* and the quotes are from that discussion.

*This panel was videotaped, and DVDs are available from http://www.activelivingresearch.org/index.php/View_Policy_Panel_Presentation/318.
Understanding the World of Policy Makers

While researchers pay close attention to creating models that effectively explain how the environment influences whether people get out and get active, policy makers must introduce and defend their initiatives within pre-existing assumptions and frameworks. Representative Sean Faircloth, who serves in the Maine House of Representatives, initiated an anti-obesity initiative two years ago that culminated in July 2005 with enactment of a statewide child anti-obesity law. He said researchers presenting data and statistics should be aware of some of the frames that come into play when taking legislative action to increase physical activity.

A powerful frame that often works against public health initiatives is a resistance to government intervention—the belief that the government should stay out of individuals’ lives. Rep. Faircloth said one effective answer to this frame is to illustrate the government intervention that has created the current unfriendly environment for physical activity, such as the subsidies to the oil and automotive industries, the subsidies for advertising of junk food, and even outdated government food programs. Federal policies have long prioritized the automobile-oriented development that research is now linking to lower levels of physical activity and increased health risks.6-9

Another frame common in public policy circles is freedom of choice, and it is important to be able to frame the debate on creating activity-friendly environments in these terms. In part, this means documenting the lack of available choices. While such data are sparse, one federal survey found that 25% of all walking trips take place on roads without sidewalks or shoulders, and that bike lanes are available for only 5% of bicycle trips.10 Rep. Faircloth noted that the contrast between low bicycling and walking rates in the US and the high rates in the Netherlands are due in large part to the environment—and the choices provided to the Dutch. When seen in this light, Faircloth believes the active living movement is “not an intervention so much as it is ensuring that our citizenry has greater freedom of choice.”

Perhaps most relevant for researchers, the burden of proof for new physical activity policies weighs on those introducing them. Policy makers are asked to prove that their policy intervention will make a difference, and often this is framed in economic terms. Will the investment of time and money pay off by avoiding increased health care costs? If results cannot be measured in economic terms, what other measurable benefits will be achieved, for quality of life or health? Rep. Faircloth recommended working to reframe the burden of proof to be on the shoulders of those who would restrict the freedom of choice that is offered when more bicycling and walking facilities are put in place.

The frames discussed above are common in the US, but federal, state, and local policy makers have very different tools at their disposal when they are looking to improve physical activity. That means they will use research differently. “Think of the dissemination of your research at all three levels of government: federal, state, and local,” recommended Cindy Burbank, Associate Administrator for Planning, Environment, and Realty at the Federal Highway Administration.

The federal government is extremely influential in transportation policy, because of the massive federal transportation bill. While the bulk of the $386 billion program goes to automobile-oriented highways, the 2005 law (known as SAFETEA-LU)11 dedicates an estimated $4.5 billion to non-motorized transportation.12 The new law