

A healthy city

Non-motorized transportation, access to fresh produce is key to reducing obesity

By Will Dendis

Everybody knows riding a bike or walking to work or school and eating fruits and vegetables is the healthy choice. But it's not always easy. If the nearest source of produce is three miles away, or the sidewalks in your neighborhood are in poor condition, most of us will tend to jump in the car. It's just easier. The result: obesity is on the rise. For the first time in modern history, the life expectancy of today's youth is less than the generation that preceded it. Diabetes, heart disease, even attention deficit disorder are all partially attributed to poor diet and inactivity.

How do we take on a problem with so many causes?

For a group of community organizations in Kingston, the answer is both simple and daunting: change the environment. The Healthy Kingston for Kids project aims to make it easier for kids to get around town on foot and by bicycle, get them interested in growing their own food and improve access to healthy food in their neighborhoods and at school events.

"The goal is to reverse childhood obesity through environmental and policy change," says Kristen Wilson, the project's director. "Our focus is on changing the institutional as well as the outdoor environment to make it sort of irresistible for children to lead healthy lifestyles."

In other words, obese children are a product of their environment. The project aims to make a lasting impact on the city, with a legacy of safe routes to parks and schools and access to healthy food. It's funded by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, awarded last fall.

Four main committees have been created: Safe Routes to School, Complete Streets, School and Community Gardens, and Healthy After-school Snacks. Partners include the City of Kingston's Parks and Recreation and Engineering departments, the Community Heart Health Coalition of Ulster County, the Kingston Land Trust, Kingston City School District, Gilmour Planning, the Ulster County Health and Planning departments, and the Rose Women's Care Service.

Map the safe, fix the unsafe

The grant is worth \$360,000, with \$90,000 to be disbursed annually over the four-year span of the project. Not chump change to be sure, but not the kind of cash you need to fund changes to transportation infrastructure. (A recent estimate to replace four blocks of sidewalks near Bailey Middle School was \$400,000.) Instead, the project's Safe

Routes to Parks and Schools Committee will focus on compiling a list of existing safe routes and outline a list of priority areas in need of repair for the city to tackle at a later date. Specific information gathered will be used to inform future planning and policy, and will strengthen grant applications.

The safe routes committee has already met several times. In early May, volunteers armed with GPS receivers will chart which routes are safe for riding and biking and which contain hazards within a two-mile radius of Kingston's elementary schools.

Hazards include no sidewalk, dangerous sidewalk, no curb-cuts, even a scary dog. Wilson stresses the importance of getting on-the-ground intelligence from the community. "I could go out and do it, but I'm not there everyday. I can't provide the depth of knowledge a community member would be able to provide us," she says.

Surveys will be distributed to parents to discover their concerns about letting their children walk to school. By the end of the first year, the plan is to pick an infrastructure project together with the city's engineering department, and seek further funds to complete it.

To define a walkable distance, Wilson says the committee is using the same guidelines the schools use to decide who qualifies for busing. For elementary school kids, that means up to a half-mile, for middle school and older, a mile. For a kid on a bike, the radius increases to two miles.

Of course, for many parents, the issue isn't distance or poor transportation infrastructure, it's letting their child walk unattended. To address this, the project is working to encourage "walking school buses," in which adult volunteers on foot lead neighborhood children to school.

Still, some routes just can't be made safe. Anna Divine Elementary School in Rifton is an example. Located on a relatively narrow, winding country road, with cars routinely flying by, it's just not a safe place for pedestrians or bicyclists — especially children. For these locations, bike rodeos on the school grounds can be held, and off-site bike paths can be mapped and distributed to parents. Some parents might not be aware of the existence of Kingston Point Park, a beautiful park on the shores of the Hudson River, currently inaccessible by sidewalk, or the community's rail trail, which you need a car to get to. In cases like this, it's about raising awareness and working to improve transportation.

Also under the educational banner: accurate information about the dangers kids face. Steve Noble, an environmental educator with the city and a project partner, thinks many parents may overestimate the risk of their child contracting Lyme disease or West Nile virus, and end up keeping their kids inside as a result.

The policy angle

The Complete Streets Committee will also tackle the subject of non-motorized transportation. Its name refers to a street's ability to support cars, bikes and pedestrians safely. Led by community planner David Gilmour, principal of Gilmour Planning, LLC in New Paltz, the committee's goal is to draft a complete streets policy for the city to adopt.

"We'll present some model policies that the city could consider in order to improve and bolster the street environment so it's safer, more vibrant and more accessible," says Gilmour, who describes the ideal plan as "basic yet ambitious."

While stressing that the committee is far from

ready to make official recommendations, Gilmour offers some examples of the sort of suggestions it could make: changes to signage to make motorists more aware of other types of traffic, striped bicycle lanes, painting crosswalks, public bike racks, landscaped medians to slow down traffic and altering intersections to decrease the distance a pedestrian has to travel.

Gilmour's committee is working on an audit of the city's existing codes, looking at how they prevent or encourage walkability.

While Gilmour's audit will look at all relevant codes, when it comes to getting specific about priority areas, the project will not be evaluating every nook and cranny of the city's transportation infrastructure. That's why Gilmour and Wilson stress the need for community input, so they can zero in on problem areas.

The committee will do a cost-benefit analysis for the complete streets plan. Gilmour says the benefits go beyond improving the health of residents — an admirable goal but not ordinarily a priority for a local government. Complete streets are also good for the economy. When people are walking along the street, socializing, and patronizing local businesses, a neighborhood exudes vibrancy. It's a more appealing face for a community, and attracts out-of-towners.

Other studies have shown a correlation between the amount of pedestrians out and about and a reduction in crime. Not surprisingly, criminals prefer

their deeds have no witnesses.

The project assumes more people would like to be active, but the environment holds them back. "If you build it, they will come," says Gilmour.

Healthy food habits

Some studies suggest the reason kids are so picky about what they eat is a consequence of our hunter-gatherer roots — lacking the education on what's good to eat, an unscrupulous child might eat a poisonous plant.

So how do we get kids to eat their vegetables? According to the project's Community and School Gardens Committee, the key is to get kids gardening. "Make it exciting," says Noble. "If a kid plants a pea, they might not normally eat peas, but if they water it all spring long, if they work at it and can eat it in June, they're going [to want to eat it]."

The district now has food gardens in 10 of its 14 schools.

Community gardens and home gardens are also encouraged. It's easy to imagine a child, enthusiastic about watching the progress of the crops at school, coming home and asking his or her parents if they can start a garden — and those same parents being all too willing to go along with an idea that will get the kids out of the house during the summer. The problem is, many people don't have a place to plant one, and the city doesn't have a community garden at present. (It's not against the law to start a garden on city property, but it's not exactly encouraged.)

Noble says the plan is to break ground on community gardens in three city parks by the end of 2011, and encourage city lawmakers to make the necessary changes to the law. He says that while city officials have been supportive, "if the administration changes, that support could disappear."

Emphasizes Noble, "We want it on the books." Another reason low-income people have a higher rate is the cost of produce. It's much cheaper to buy by corn-based snacks and processed food, says Noble. "Carrots shouldn't be more expensive than Twinkies."

Always a popular hobby, gardening seems to be undergoing a resurgence of late. With the "buy local" movement leading to thriving farmers markets and resonating with more and more people, and the recession forcing families to cut back on expenses, it makes sense.

"Hard economic times drive home the fact that produce is expensive," says Arthur Zaczkiwicz, co-chair of the School and Community Garden Committee, who likens the increased interest in gardening among

Americans as "going back to [our] roots."

If the project has a geographic focus within Kingston, it's midtown. Dominated by Broadway, one of the more dangerous streets to walk, bike or even cross on foot, it's also home to much of the city's minority population. The neighborhood's grocery needs are met by five bodegas, with fresh produce hard to find. Zaczkiwicz says the committee will encourage business owners to stock more healthy food.

Chaired by a registered dietician, the Healthy Afterschool Snacks Committee will focus on ensuring students have access to something more nutritious than a Snickers bar at school functions. (The project isn't getting involved in school lunches.) Some examples include yoghurt and pretzels in the vending machine, and fruits at the refreshment table during sporting events.

Can we do this in my community?

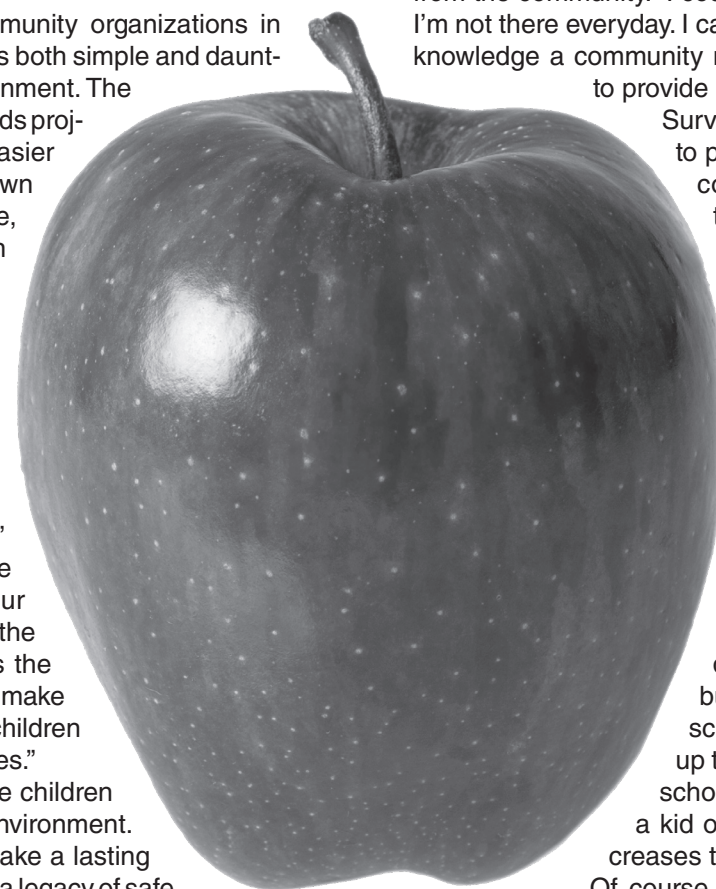
The Healthy Communities project is unique because of its holistic approach. It's predicated on the idea that by enthusiastically attacking the obesity problem on a number of fronts and changing the culture in school and local government, the end result will be more successful and long-lasting. That said, the majority of what these committees are doing could be replicated under the leadership of a few energetic volunteers working closely with the local PTA or the Town Board. These include programs like the walking school bus, surveying safe routes to school, and planting gardens at the schools or in community parks. Chances are, if your community lacks these and you bring it up, the reception will be positive. (And you'll probably be asked to head up the effort.) This project provides dedicated and ambitious people from the community to lead the way, but their involvement is, in most cases, temporary.

For more technical matters, like Gilmour's audit of the city's transportation and land-use policies, volunteerism may not be the most feasible solution. But that's not to say a community can't go

out looking for grants to improve non-motorized transportation. Municipalities are always revising their visionary planning documents with an eye toward future changes to the law or grant search, and the money is out there. But they won't find it if they don't look.

Steve Noble says the amount of interest in the project has been tremendous. He admits when they first put the call out for volunteers a few months ago, they didn't know how many people would show up. Without a strong volunteer presence, the ability of the program to effect change would be limited. "There are a lot of smart and intelligent people out there, and they will come," says Noble. What's needed is for somebody to take the lead, someone to ask for help.

He adds that the example Kingston will set and the policy documents the project produces could be adopted by other towns. The blueprint will be there.



Why Kingston?

Kingston was one of 50 cities chosen to participate in the Robert Wood Johnson's Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities project. The program targets communities like Kingston with a high rate of obesity and a significant minority population.

According to a 2007 report by the Ulster County Health Department, 16.6 percent of the Kingston school district's first and third graders were at risk of becoming overweight, 21.7 percent of them were already overweight and 5.7 were extremely overweight. Furthermore, median income is \$10,000 less than the state average and over a quarter of children are living below the poverty line.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the nation's largest philanthropy organization dedicated to issues of health and wellness, allocated \$33 million to the project. According to the foundation's Web site, "In every community, initiatives will focus on neighborhoods where obesity is exacerbated by issues like acute unemployment and poverty, crime, dangerous traffic or too few grocery stores. Broad partnerships of local agencies and organizations will work to change public policies and local environments to remove the barriers that make it hard for children to eat nutritious foods and be physically active."

In the case of Kingston, the project "aims to transform a decaying urban core of empty storefronts and a hazardous main street into a midtown with parks, trails and community gardens."

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