

Healthy Kids Healthy Communities

BUILDING HEALTHIER TOMORROWS

Healthy Kids McKinley County

Three blocks from Gallup's city hall, five acres of empty space was covered in broken glass and trash. Lined with Siberian elms on one side, the vacant property was the ideal spot for drinkers and transients who wanted to remain hidden.

Two local families donated the private land to the city. Karl Lohmann, who coordinates Healthy Kids McKinley County, helped guide the city's effort to transform the abandoned area into a safe, community space for physical activity.



Healthy Kids McKinley County worked with the Youth Conservation Corps that Lohmann leads to clear 30 tons of alcohol-related glass and 15 tons of other trash. They replaced it with 2,000 yards of high-clay content soil that they used as an overlay for tread in Gallup's new bike pump park. They added retaining walls, installed a fence and established a parking area.

Where people used to loiter and drink, children and teens ride over 2 ½ miles of tread and bike features. Neighbors walk their dogs along the perimeter path. School groups visit, and bike competitions are held there, including a race with cyclist pro Levi Leipheimer.

"It was a trashed-out place that we restored into an open, active space for Gallup's free-range children," Lohmann said.



The Brickyard Bike Park is one example of how Healthy Kids McKinley County is making local changes so it's easier for children and their families to be active in their community and choose healthy foods. The New Mexico Department of Health supports the Healthy

Kids initiative that is creating more opportunities for children to walk and bike safely in Gallup, learn how to grow food and eat fresh fruit and vegetables during their school day.

Gallup is the largest city in McKinley County with a racially diverse population of about 22,000. The city has been known for its American Indian art as well as its struggle to reduce rates of alcohol-related injuries, diseases and deaths. This area in northwestern New Mexico is fairly isolated; it is the most populated city between Flagstaff, Ariz. and Albuquerque, two hours to the east.

Gallup is becoming a destination for mountain bikers, and Healthy Kids McKinley County is enhancing the community's outdoor recreation opportunities by developing in-town bike paths and safe routes to school as well as building high desert adventure trails.

Throughout the recent summer, Healthy Kids McKinley County had bikes, helmets and trained cycle instructors at the bike park to give kids a tour of the paths, ensure their helmet fit and talk with their parents about proper supervision. Lohmann has brought school and youth groups to the park from Gallup and satellite communities like Acoma Pueblo, 89 miles east of Gallup.

Promoting the bike park and educating kids about how to safely use bikes is an important part of Healthy Kids' work, Lohmann said.

"Ten percent of the 1,000 kids we trained on bike safety this summer had never been on a bike," he said. "I absolutely feel like that will change with the opening of the bike park and training kids. We are educating and encouraging daily bicycle use and enforcing safety rules."

Gallup City Councilor Allan Landavazo said the transformation of the littered area into a thriving bike park has been amazing.

"A lot of these things help people develop an active lifestyle," Landavazo said. "I know people who went out and bought a bike or bought their kid a trail bike. Some of their first trail riding in their lives is at that bike park. It provides a great place for kids, especially in the summer during the day."



Lohmann will continue the bike training, which included conducting bike safety sessions with law enforcement on streets adjacent to schools. The work around bike safety augments Healthy Kids' effort to get more children to walk and roll to school.

Previously Lohmann and a Healthy Kids volunteer crew from the Boys and Girls Club developed walking school buses in which students walk to and from school in groups. The Youth Conservation Corps installed fitness trails at all elementary schools and are building trails that connect schools to neighborhoods.

One of Healthy Kids' recent trail projects involved extending a trail to Second Street on the west and Burke Avenue on the east to connect with three more schools and neighborhoods so it's safer for children to walk and ride. Healthy Kids McKinley County uses a combination of safe streets and designated paths to establish safe routes for school children, always ensuring that kids can reach their school from more than one direction.

Helping the city determine how to best accommodate pedestrians and bikers is another focus of Healthy Kids McKinley County. The Boardman Avenue project is a good example of Healthy Kids' influence in establishing safe streets.

Boardman Avenue is a state highway that Lohmann jokingly calls the center of Gallup's universe. Along the busy four-lane road is the city's jail, metropolitan court, police department, Gallup Detox, Gallup Aquatic Center and three schools. It is also the route to get to the two local hospitals and UNM Gallup. The road has high speeds, one crosswalk and has been the site of several pedestrian deaths, including a woman who was killed in the crosswalk on her way to work.



Mock-up illustration of Boardman Ave. "Road Diet" showing benefits to pedestrians

New Mexico Department of Transportation is spending \$2 million for the Boardman "Road Diet." The redesign involves adding two more traffic lights and two more crosswalks, reducing four travel lanes to two lanes, creating a center turn lane and establishing lower speed limits. Healthy Kids McKinley County reviewed the plans with state and local officials and Tim Rogers, a biking and trail expert who consults with Healthy Kids.

"When Healthy Kids looked at that project we saw that it was not pedestrian friendly enough according to national standards," Lohmann said. "We were able to make modifications to the plan. We paid attention to the arterials – the pedestrian shed that connected kids from neighborhoods to schools. We recommended wide shoulders for bike lanes. We recommended and got approved an off-road side path specifically engineered for pedestrians."

Healthy Kids and coalition partners are creating a culture change in Gallup -- supporting bikers and walkers in equality with motorists. Councilor Landavazo grew up in Gallup, serves on the Adventure Gallup and Beyond Board of Directors and recognizes the

importance of creating complete streets, which support all forms of traffic. He said a city project to re-stripe Aztec Street will include bike lanes. The city purchased a new road striping rig for its comprehensive plan toward complete streets.

"If both adults and young people feel like they have a safe route to bike -- whether they are going to a friend's house, to school or work -- without a doubt, our youth and our adults are going to be healthier," he said. "We have such a high rate of diabetes in our community, a lot of our adults need to be physically active so they are not a statistic and become a diabetic."

Lohmann is planning additional connections with a goal of making it possible for teens to walk or bike across town to Gallup High School to Rehoboth and back.

"At public meetings we talk about people who don't drive. It's absolutely changing the environment," Lohmann said. "Some of the best successes we've had is connecting recreation at senior centers with bike-pedestrian friendly routes. It's not an anti-car message. It's pro-pedestrian and promotes wellness."

Healthy Kids McKinley County messaging has reached the trail lovers of the community too. Gallup has developed 75 miles of trails in McKinley County, including multi-use trails, urban paths, safe routes to school and adventure trails in forests. It has been considered an economic-development tool to attract tourists. Now health is a major consideration as well. Gallup Family Fitness Series uses the public school stadium, Veterans' Park, the aquatic center and community trails for monthly wellness events.

Health-care providers encourage patients to use the trail system as part of their wellness routine. Healthy Kids will publish an urban and rural trail map defining prescription trails that health-care providers prescribe to patients who need support in moving more.

"Trails make a huge difference when the health impact is considered," Lohmann said. "We do trail events that are focused on fitness and health rather than just competition. Adding health impact to the trails agenda has engendered a lot of support and activity."

In addition to its work in the community, Healthy Kids is helping create healthier environments in the Gallup-McKinley County Schools. The school board approved the district's revised wellness policy last year, which prioritizes physical activity, water and healthy food for children. Among the specifics, the policy supports opening school yards to community members and ensuring children eat healthy foods during their school day.

The revamped policy prompted the school district to apply for a federal grant that provides 14 elementary schools with fruit and vegetable snacks three times a week for every student. Healthy Kids provided the district with nutrition curriculum so teachers can educate their students about the produce they eat.

“It’s neat for them to get to know their fruits and vegetables,” said Carol Burnett, the school district’s food services specialist. “One of the cooks reported to me that the kids love it and like it better than the candy they’ve been eating. She was very happy about it. She’s also a parent so it made her feel really good about what her kids are eating.”

Burnett has worked in the district for 26 years and was responsible for the successful addition of pre-packaged salads to school lunches. She said students and teachers continue to buy the salads, which are offered for lunch in all of the 35 schools.

The salads and Healthy Kids’ smoothie revolution proved that children will choose healthy food when they have an option. Healthy Kids McKinley County offered fruit smoothies as a healthy alternative to junk food sold at fundraisers. The smoothies were such a success that Healthy Kids trained students and staff to make their own, local service clubs donated blenders to schools, and children began making smoothies at home.



School gardens have been instrumental in developing children’s interest in healthy food as well. Nine schools have gardens of various sizes. The largest and most comprehensive garden program is at Chee Dodge Elementary, which has a 1 1/2 –acre garden that involves every student at the school. The garden has school and community support, including the Gallup Indian Medical Center.

“We keep actual data and know that kids are eating healthy,” said Stacy Lovell, a fourth-grade teacher who is leading the garden this year. “The part I noticed this year was how many parents are saying, ‘Can you teach me how to take this home,’ which is basically our goal. The kids are making better choices in the cafeteria, understanding the value of fruits and vegetables, and parents say they are making better choices at home.”

Healthy Kids has worked behind the scenes to help the garden flourish. Lohmann and his Youth Conservation Corps put up fencing to prevent wild horses from getting into the garden, helped install a hoop house and has hooked staff up with training on composting and safe agricultural practices so the garden can supply food to the school’s cafeteria.

“One of the things we want to do is get our vegetables we produce into our kitchen,” Lovell said. “By USDA rules, we have to take that safe agricultural training and make sure we can do the best we can. Now we’re working on producing enough that we can put food into the cafeteria once a week.”

Each classroom cultivates its own produce, including a pizza bed of tomatoes, basil, onions and sweet peppers for the 2nd grade and a rainbow garden of different colored

vegetables for the kindergartners. On Wednesday, the school operates a small market to sell produce to parents.

“We charge for the produce which goes back into buying things we need for our garden,” Lovell said. “What we’re really working on is getting it sustainable.”

In addition to supplying the cafeteria, school staff would like to create starter plants that parents could take home to use in their own gardens. Staff would teach parents how to establish raised garden beds.

“Parents gardening at home with their kids – that’s where we are headed,” Lovell said. “It’s a community effort. Our entire school is working on it. We have a business partner donating tons of seeds. Everybody is buying in and trying to make healthier choices for our student population.”

Enabling children and their families to make healthier choices is the ultimate goal of Healthy Kids McKinley County. With the development of safer roads and trails, school gardens and produce samples, children are learning how to take care of their bodies and taking advantage of more opportunities to be active.