

Healthy Kids Healthy Communities

BUILDING HEALTHIER TOMORROWS

Healthy Kids Curry County

Healthy Kids Curry County pitched the idea of connecting the city of Clovis' parks at just the right time.

"We were in the process of developing this bike-route plan throughout the city," said City Engineer Justin Howalt. "It worked out really well. We thought it was a great idea to look at how to get to different parks. That's something we kept in mind when we developed this map. All four of our major parks will be connected by bike lanes."

Healthy Kids Curry County, an initiative supported by the New Mexico Department of Health, makes it easier for people to choose healthy foods and active lifestyles by making changes where kids live, learn and play. When Mitch Gray started working on the initiative in Clovis, he talked with the city about linking the city's trails and developing streets that are friendlier to bikers and pedestrians.

Now the city has created a bike/pedestrian map showing plans to restripe about 20 streets to add bike lanes. For streets that can't accommodate bike lanes, the city will post share-the-road signs to make motorists aware that the street is a designated bike route. That designation indicates the road is safe for bikers, Howalt said.

Most importantly, the city is changing its street system so new or rebuilt roads become complete streets, which considers pedestrians, bikers and vehicle traffic equally.

"As our city continues to grow, the next step is always remembering to keep moving forward with these principles, making sure we accommodate all the forms of transportation available to people," Howalt said.

Key Community Successes

- 11 of 12 Clovis Municipal Schools (CMS) elementary schoolyards are open for community use outside of school hours; school-specific welcoming signage has been designed and installed at 9 schools so far
- 11 of 12 CMS elementary schools maintain daily salad bars
- 5 Curry County elementary schools and over 1,144 students took part in the 2014 International Walk to School Day on October 8th
- Implemented Farm to Table's Love Local campaign in CMS schools featuring one locally or regionally grown product per month
- Established a 14-plot community garden in partnership with Plains Regional Medical Center; produce was distributed to over 100 people during the summer and fall
- Healthy Kids Curry County is working collaboratively with Clovis city planners to enhance community-wide trail and park connectivity
- Created 6 new miles and marked 8 existing miles of bike lanes in Clovis



A move towards complete streets in Clovis

So far the city has re-striped four streets, including re-developing Norris Street, which runs in front of a large elementary school. The city added bike lanes on both sides, sidewalks with buffers and signs so kids can walk or bike safely to school.

“This is one of the first steps in allowing us to develop connectivity in Clovis,” Gray said. “I see a whole lot of activity in the areas of town where bike lanes have been implemented.”



Welcoming signage at Zia Elementary

Gray is working on plans to promote the bike lanes as well as the school district’s open playgrounds that community members can use. “The promotional piece will be packed with the idea of becoming a more active community and opportunities to do so.”

Gray has tapped into social media before, setting up a Healthy Kids Facebook page that promotes activities and offers healthy eating tips. He plans to use social media, radio and newspaper promotion to make sure people know they can safely bike around Clovis, he said.

As a way to help increase people’s activity levels, Presbyterian’s Plains Regional Medical Center plans to start a prescription trails program in which health-care providers prescribe specific trails to patients who need to move more. Plains Regional is looking to hire someone who could oversee the program, said Terri Marney, director of nursing at Plains Regional for 29 years.

“Basically it’s a good way to get people moving in a way that’s safe for them after being screened by their physician,” Marney said. “I think the overall benefit is to increase the health of our community members and people who have chronic conditions like diabetes. Increasing activity levels can help people manage that disease.”

Plains Regional Medical Center, one of the biggest employers in Curry County, has been a supportive partner of Healthy Kids Curry County. The community hospital has offered volunteers for health events at elementary schools and has helped start a new community garden on its property. Plains Regional serves eastern New Mexico and western Texas, where the big cities of Lubbock and Amarillo are 90 miles away.

Clovis, the biggest city of Curry County with about 39,000 residents, is situated about 20 miles from small-town Portales and Eastern New Mexico University. Cannon Air Force Base is nearby and draws families from across the country. Clovis has been known as an agricultural community, but farms have switched from cultivating produce to planting wheat and hay as a more affordable way to farm during New Mexico’s drought. As a result, the current generation doesn’t know much about gardening, Gray said.



Produce harvested from Patchwork Farms
Community Garden on the PRMC campus

Healthy Kids Curry County wants to develop a community of gardeners starting with the community garden. Plains Regional provides the water and land, which the county leases for \$1 a year. Gray and volunteers built 14 raised garden beds that community members can adopt for an annual fee of \$10.

“Our idea is to really educate people on how to grow produce for themselves or to sell at the farmer’s market,” Gray said. “We’re trying to develop this garden into a place where education can happen.”

During the first year of the community garden, community members adopted five plots, including one for teen court, which plans to offer the produce to the participating teens.

“Instead of picking up trash, they get to do something fun and educational and something that can change their lives,” Gray said.

Healthy Kids is working with the New Mexico State University’s Agricultural Science Center to develop an educational program for elementary and middle-school students and community members. They also want to teach local farmers how they can grow produce on portions of their land.

Luther Dunlap, an agriculture agent at the New Mexico State University Curry County Extension Office, is setting up a master gardener course to develop expert gardeners in the area who can assist adults in cultivating their plots as well as help teach students about gardening.

“By having master gardeners on hand, we can give more one-on-one educational opportunities to the citizens and more hands on deck so outreach can be that much bigger,” Dunlap said. “I’d really like to see them involved in the community and one of the ways of doing that is getting them into the schools.”

Two elementary schools and two middle schools are starting or expanding gardens. Gray is working with two other elementary schools to resurrect their greenhouses. One teacher comes to the community garden to try new seeds and learn from other growers.

“We purposely developed this program to be linked into other movements that are happening so it’s not dependent on itself, which is huge for it to be successful,” Gray said.

The other possible link is school food. Gray and Dunlap have been meeting with local farmers and Clovis Municipal Schools to set up a farm-to-school program. No single grower in the area can

provide the quantity needed for school meals, so Paul Klein, director of student nutrition, is arranging to feature one product a month that is locally or regionally grown.

So far he has scheduled cherry tomatoes in September, watermelon in October and apples in November. Klein will give students information about the food, including where it is grown.

“It’s an educational tool,” Klein said. “Kids need to know food doesn’t come from Wal-Mart in a bin. It comes from the earth.”

While many food-service directors worry that local food will increase their costs, Klein pointed out that buying locally helps his community’s economy and develops a marketplace for local farmers. He said it looked like some items are pricier but not cost-prohibitive.

“Usually we buy through a supplier who buys from someone else,” he said. “This way we’re dealing directly with the farmer – no middle man. If you have issues, they are readily adjusted.”

Klein has been a leader in his efforts to ensure students eat healthy food at school. Previously he set up salad bars with pre-portioned salads that have become a hit among school staff and students. He has also donated fruit throughout the school year so elementary-school students can try different kinds in their classrooms.

Local growers may be able to supply some of the fruit this year as a way to provide food on a small scale to schools, Gray said. The Curry County Extension Office is providing fresh fruit and vegetable samples with nutrition education to a few pilot elementary schools this year as well.

It is community partners like Klein and the County Extension Office that make Healthy Kids Curry County a success. Numerous organizations and businesses volunteer each year to help conduct the 5.2.1.0 Challenge in conjunction with a health fair at elementary schools. The Challenge helps children develop healthy habits by asking them to follow the following behaviors every day for 21 days: eat five or more fruits and vegetables, limit screen time to two hours, be physically active for an hour and drink plenty of water.



5.2.1.0 poster board created by Coach Scanlan and her students at Texico Elementary

“We do have a community that always wants to help their kids, and they drop their differences and come together,” Gray said.

Gray had originally planned to have different groups adopt a school to lead the 5.2.1.O Challenge. Instead, Cannon Air Force Base is providing as many volunteers as needed, and principals and physical education teachers are taking charge of the 21-day Challenge.

Seeing schools schedule their Challenge and health fair almost a year in advance tells Gray “a shift is happening, and it’s become what they really want to do,” he said.

After almost three years of Healthy Kids Curry County, Gray is encouraged by the lasting changes he sees, like the city accommodating walkers and bikers on city streets.

“There will come a day when I’m gone and they will continue the work. That is ultimate sustainability,” he said.

Gray reflected on how Clovis has embraced the Healthy Kids initiative. “I think the reason people buy into what we do is it’s work that changes lives,” Gray said. “It’s work that changes communities.”