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Recreation and Education on the Greenway

Introduction

Greenway Systems are defined as any scenic route set aside for travel or recreational activities. These types of systems have been popping up all over the United States in efforts to beautify a community by reducing traffic and air pollution, but more importantly, they have been built for use by the community. Greenway Systems give all the citizens of a community a complimentary place to exercise, and thus promote healthy living throughout the population. Obesity has become a growing problem in our nation and has become a large problem among the youth of the United States. With the new found popularity of the Greenway Systems, I have proposed a program that entails educating Binghamton High School students about healthy living through the use of the greenway. The mission of this program, called "The Amazing Race", is to educate students about the obesity epidemic, present information about healthy eating habits, and promote exercise that is doable by any type of student, while exposing them to a unique amenity in the area.

The Problem of Childhood Obesity

Childhood obesity is a growing medical crisis, and if it is not treated it will lead to further medical problems in adulthood. "Childhood obesity is related to adult levels of lipids, lipoproteins, blood pressure, and insulin and to morbidity from coronary heart disease. However, the importance of the age at which obesity develops in these associations remains uncertain."(Freedman et. al., 712). Overall, physicians and experts have come to the agreement that the earlier childhood obesity can be treated, or prevented from occurring at all, the better off one's health will be from childhood through adulthood. While obesity in children can lead to many medical issues involving orthopedic abnormalities, neurological problems such as hypertension, increased risk of gallstone formation, breathing difficulties and diabetes, studies have shown the most damaging consequence of obesity, particularly childhood obesity, are the damaging social stigmas associated with being overweight. In an article about the risks and results of childhood obesity, A. Must states, "Few problems in childhood may have as significant an impact on childhood emotional development as obesity. Studies of children as young as six years of age suggest that overweight individuals are most likely to be described as lazy, lying, cheating, sloppy, dirty, ugly and stupid."(Must et. al., 3). Childhood is a time where one's morals, beliefs, and self esteem develop and mature. If the aforementioned criticisms begin in young children and carry through adulthood, obesity becomes both a medical and psychological issue.

Research done studying the eating habits of children and teens in the United States has shown that only one percent of America's youth meet all national standards for proper eating. Kathryn A. Munoz and colleagues found that, "percentages of youth meeting recommendations ranged from ~30% for fruit, grain, meat, and dairy to 36% for vegetables. Sixteen percent of youth did not meet any recommendations..." (Munoz et. al.). The goal of a program connecting

students with healthy living and exercise is to instill healthy eating and exercising habits into the students, so they can be practiced for the rest of their lives.

Greenway Systems Across the US:

Arkansas

Many studies have shown that livable, walkable communities are more attractive to people looking for a community in which to settle, as well as to those people who are already living, working and raising a family in an area. Also, these trails used for walking, jogging and biking allow community members to take steps toward a healthier lifestyle. In Little Rock, Arkansas, The Medical Mile was completed through the work of many physicians and the state's largest cardiology clinic to promote the prevention of obesity and heart disease. Once completed, it became the nation's first outdoor health museum. The Medical Mile is part of the fourteen mile long Arkansas River Trail which also extends an additional ten miles to the Pinnacle Mountain State Park. The medical mile portion of the trail is deemed unique due to its focus on the promotion of a healthy lifestyle, "It includes a 1,300 foot three-dimensional mural wall, a wellness promenade with artful displays, as well as a Body-Mind-Spirit entry plaza that encourages trail users to remember that a healthy mind and spirit are the key steps toward a healthy body." (Eastin, *Medical Mile Premise*). The walkway is being praised by Arkansas officials across the state because it makes exercise very accessible to all of the citizens in the Little Rock community.

Utah

The state of Utah is also working to make their communities healthier. Countless articles have been written by people throughout the state saying that obesity is an epidemic due to the home, school, work, and neighborhood environments in which all people live. Society, as a whole, has become less physically active and Utahans are calling for changes to make their communities more accommodating to healthy living (*Obesity in Utah*).

Michigan

In the state of Michigan, the Michigan Department of Community Health (MDCH) is taking steps to make their state a community that caters to exercise and healthy living by fundraising to build trails that prevent obesity and heart disease, injury and ensure a healthy aging process. The MDCH plans to raise money to construct a Greenway System that connects its communities to the natural resources in the area. The overall goal of the Greenway System is to provide safe trails for children and adults to walk to school and work, and provide the senior citizens a facility to use so they can grow old gracefully (Petersmarck et. al., *Partnerships in Creating Active Communities*).

Minnesota

The Midtown Greenway is a publicly funded Greenway System in Minneapolis, Minnesota. This greenway is full of beautiful plant life, an outdoor art gallery, and a bicycle and walking path within a wide corridor. Once complete, the Midtown Greenway will connect

Minnesota's Chain of Lakes to the Mississippi river. A long term goal of the Midtown Greenway is for mass transit to coexist with the trails. The coalition behind the greenway is pushing to bring back the rail trolley system that existed in the city until 1956. The Midtown Greenway Coalition (MGC) is rallying for this system to be reinstated because, "a vintage trolley line would be a friendly neighbor to bicyclists and walkers, and also offer high quality express service to thousands of transit riders per day."(MGC). This greenway system has done wonders for the Minneapolis community; providing paths for both biking and walking. Due to the Midtown Greenway, it is quicker to bike through south Minneapolis than drive. In addition to transportation improvements, the system has also instilled a sense of pride throughout the Minneapolis community, has cleaned up an old and besieged railway, and brought art and recreation to the community at large (MGC, *About the Greenway*).

The East Coast

The East Coast Greenway Alliance is a nonprofit organization based in Wake Field, Rhode Island working to connect cities through the Greenway Systems that have begun popping up all along the east coast. Greenway building is happening all over the nation, but on the east coast, Greenways are being built to restore neglected railway lines and to reinstate public contact with rivers and waterfronts. Once complete, the East Coast Greenway will be located along the flat coastal plain, and go through the cores of twenty five major cities along the eastern seaboard. The approximately 3,000 mile long route will begin in Calais, Maine and end in Key West, Florida. Volunteers who are working on building and connecting these greenways aim to have the system be 100% off road which is quite an imposing challenge. Currently only 21% of the East Coast Greenway is completely traffic free. The East Coast Greenway Alliance stated:

[The East Coast Greenway] will offer a varied landscape, passing at times in the shadows of skyscrapers, at times winding through suburban neighborhoods, but also will often take the user into the surprisingly rural areas that still exist within our east coast Megalopolis... enable residents to travel short distances from their homes to local points of interest, and tourists to travel for a few days or even weeks to explore the rich history and culture within the East Coast region.
(*About the East Coast Greenway*)

This system is very unique because of its extensive length and passage through multiple states. It offers recreation to both the locals of the community, and to tourists traveling along the lengthy trail. Once a reality, the East Coast Greenway will be a great asset to the inhabitants of the east coast because of its amazing recreational uses, and it will attract people from all over the country and possibly the world, bringing money into many cities throughout the coastline.

Initiatives in Binghamton

Binghamton is also taking steps to promote a healthier New York. A coalition called Stay Healthy Kids has formed in Broome County with the goal of preventing childhood obesity, lessening the risk of disease in children and promoting a healthy lifestyle. Steps have been

made to make sidewalks and other walkways handicapped accessible , as well as safer so parents will feel more comfortable about allowing their children to walk to school. Steps have also been taken by the schools to make the cafeteria food healthier and more appealing to the kids' taste buds. (Fell, *Program Urges Kids to Adopt a Healthier Lifestyle*).

Binghamton is an attractive area and has a lot to offer, but many of this city's treasures are hidden throughout the valley. Binghamton is known as the carousel capitol of the world and boasts many parks with walkable and bikeable pathways. Over the years, a Greenway System has begun to develop, and once complete, will span approximately a length of thirty miles, connecting villages throughout the entire Greater Binghamton area. As each phase of the Greenway is completed, Binghamton inches closer to its goal of being a truly walkable community. This system of trails will make this community much more mobile, and hopefully much more health conscious because it is a fantastic facility that can be used for physical activity because some exercise is better than no physical activity in lives of community members. Binghamton, like every other city in the United States faces the obesity epidemic. The epidemic affects all age groups, but is increasingly seen among children. If children are obese, they are more likely to be obese as adults, so it is vital that we address the obesity epidemic that is ravishing our youth.

My Proposal

The only way to beat this epidemic is with education about the obesity epidemic and exposure to recreational outlets so healthy living can begin. Over the course of this semester, I have been working with community leaders and Mr. Donald Cole, a Binghamton High School faculty member, to develop a program that educates about the importance of fitness through use of the Greenway System for fitness. I propose that the Binghamton School District adopts this idea and either integrates the use of this facility into the school's curriculum, or makes a trip to a part of the Greenway System an annual "Healthy Living "event. The purpose of showing the greenway to the youth of this community is both to expose them to a free recreational space that is close to their homes where they can exercise regularly and also to show them the beauty of the Binghamton area in hopes of encouraging them to make a life for themselves in this city. Seeing and connecting with the resources of this community will instill a sense of pride about their hometown, the Binghamton area, in the children.

Seeing the success of recreational features in other cities and states leads to the conclusion that a Greenway System in the Binghamton area can play a large role in improving the image of the city as well as improving the lives of the people who inhabit Binghamton. Like Arkansas, Utah, Michigan, Minnesota, and the entire East Coast, the Binghamton area is taking steps to make its community healthier. The pieces of the Greenway that are complete are already being widely used and the future of the Greenway is very bright. These trails will make exercise widely accessible to the people of this area and thus help fight obesity and many other health issues associated with being overweight.

A Proposed "Healthy Living" Event

The "Healthy Living" event will take place at Otsiningo Park because this park includes a fitness trail that is connected to the Greenway System. Otsiningo Park is a vital part of this community because it is equipped with paved paths, softball and soccer fields, playgrounds, picnic areas, and runs along an area of wooded riverbank. The features of the park promote exercise and attract a wide variety of people. The park is known to many in this community because of its array of recreational amenities, but also because it is home to the Spiedie Festival, which is one of the largest events this area hosts. Because this park is such a pillar in the Binghamton community, many children attribute fond memories from their childhood to the park (I learned to ride my bike at Otsiningo Park). Revisiting the park as high school students will hopefully enable them to see Binghamton as a great place to grow up and grow old.

The event will take place in the end of August and function as an orientation session for a group of soon to be 9th graders at Binghamton High School. After discussing the time of year to hold this event with Mr. Cole, we decided that the end of the summer would work the best for two reasons; first, this event would be a great transitioning piece for the students to get excited about high school, and secondly, by having it during the summertime, we can avoid issues with permission forms. At first, I wanted to take the entire freshman class to the greenway at Otsiningo Park, but after discussing more ideas with Mr. Cole, we both decided it would be better to start off with a smaller group of students, and then as the program grows the number of students will grow as well.

Mr. Cole works with the Liberty Partnership Program, which is a program that aims to improve New York's higher education community by working with children who have the potential to attend college, but need a mentor so that getting a college education becomes a reality. Because of his involvement in this program, Mr. Cole suggested the group of students that will experience this "healthy living" event be a group of about twenty five Liberty Partnership participants, who currently attend East Middle School as 8th graders and will be making the transition to BHS this coming fall. I think this is a fantastic idea because with the smaller group of kids, crowd control will not be an issue and we can see how the day functions, and then begin to change and grow with next year's group of students.

The event will begin in the early afternoon and last for approximately two to three hours. It will consist of a scavenger hunt, which Mr. Cole and I have named "The Amazing Race", which will take place along the main loop off the Otsiningo Trail. The group of students will be split into two teams (1-2 chaperones for each team), with each team starting at a different point on the trail. Along the trail there will be ten to twelve stations. At each station there will be a card with a question about health such as what is the recommended amount of fruits you should eat per day? The answer (2-4 servings of fruit per day) will be on the flip side of the card along with a exercise task to complete, such as 5 push-ups and a clue which will lead the students to the next station. After both groups have completed "The Amazing Race", the entire group will gather in the park's picnic shelter (available by reservation) for a picnic lunch. The food will be provided by the Binghamton School District's cafeteria and will be, of course,

healthy food such as sandwiches, fruits, vegetables, juice and water. After lunch, the day will end with a lecture about healthy eating, exercising, and living. Prizes, such as water bottles will be distributed to all of the students, as well as brochures about proper eating habits and different types of exercise. Also, to tie this event in with the transition to high school, we will open a discussion to the students to talk about any fears, concerns, and goals they have about high school.

Transitioning to high school as 9th graders is a very interesting time because you are once again the youngest students in the school and the high school is much larger than the middle school (BHS has about 1,800 students). The goal of this event is to promote exercise and a healthy lifestyle and also to excite the students about starting high school at BHS. This event will give these students a chance to exercise while hanging out with friends and allow them to see the beauty and usefulness of the park and the entire Greenway System. Mr. Cole and I plan to have the first annual "Amazing Race" take place at the end of this summer (August 2008)!

Conclusion

The popularity of Greenway Systems is positive and shows that people across the nation are realizing that exercise facilities accessible to everyone are an essential part of a community. I am not the type of person who will go to a gym to work out because I find them intimidating, and many other Americans feel the same way. The Medical Mile, is unique because it is the first outdoor health museum, and promotes a healthy mind, body and spirit through its art displays and murals that are along the trail. The Binghamton Greenway System runs through historic areas throughout this area, and once complete will contain signage telling the length walked and also some facts about the Binghamton area, such as some history and information about the plant and animal life in the area. Just as the East Coast Greenway is revitalizing old railways, the Binghamton Greenway System, particularly the Vestal Rail Trail portion, has positively changed neglected rail lines for modern use. The complete Binghamton Greenway System will be unique because it promotes recreation, exercise and education. The beauty of our Greenway System is its convenience to every person in the community. The Binghamton Greenway System is equipped with walking and biking paths, and runs through parks, which allows exercise opportunities for all people, whether they are an athlete or just enjoy walking. The Greenway System in the Binghamton area is especially important to this area's youth because it is a convenient amenity where they can exercise and improve their lifestyle so they are not plagued by diseases and social stereotypes that accompany childhood and adult obesity. If students in the Binghamton area begin to use the Greenway System now, they can incorporate it as a part of their daily physical activity routine to be used for the rest of their lives. Exercise and healthy living are great for the mind, body and spirit and the Greenway System is a fabulous tool to strengthen the population's health and confidence.

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