

5. Omaha: A Midwestern City Chips Away At the Tyranny of the Automobile

In 2002, a nonprofit group called Live Well Omaha (LWO) received a \$200,000 grant to persuade the city's residents to be more active.

Over the next three years, the group, a nonprofit that encourages Omaha residents to exercise and eat right, worked hard to increase cycling. But as the campaign rolled on, those involved realized there was a problem: "We were pushing people to bike to work, yet we had only one mile of bike lane in the whole city," said Kerri Peterson, executive director of Live Well Omaha.

The city did have some bike trails — 100 miles throughout the area. But the trails didn't connect to downtown or most neighborhoods, and they only traveled north and south, which left out residents who lived on the east or west sides.

As it studied the issue, LWO realized that the city and its surrounding suburbs were not designed to encourage physical activity. "Here in Omaha, we have engineered healthy living out of our environment," said Peterson. "We've only built for the automobile."

Nebraska's largest city, Omaha, has a population of 410,000. Its geography is determined largely by the automobile: sprawling sidewalk-less suburbs surround the city, malls and big-box stores provide much of the shopping, and fast-food restaurants dot many street corners.

Ironically, Peterson said, the area's relative lack of traffic and gridlock encourages a sedentary lifestyle. "It's too easy to get around," she said. "Getting in your car is the easiest choice."

Over the past six years, LWO and its partners — local governments as well as area health and civic groups — have worked to change this landscape in Omaha and surrounding Douglas County. They have moved beyond bicycling, and are now trying to increase the city's level of walking, exercise, and healthy eating. These efforts got a major boost last year, when the CDC gave LWO and the Douglas County Health Department a two-year, \$5.7 million grant to encourage healthy eating and active living.

LWO has focused much of its work on bicycling. At first, not everyone was receptive. In 2003, the group approached the city planning department about the possibility of a network of bike lanes on Omaha's streets. The planners told Peterson that their job was limited to moving automobiles.

But the group persisted, and the planning officials came around. In 2008, the city began creating 20 miles of on-street bike lanes to make riding downtown safer and easier for commuters.

The money for the work, \$600,000, came from a local charity and an anonymous donor.

Almost all the bike lanes are on streets; many follow former street-car routes, because these streets were already wider to accommodate the tracks. LWO is now working with the city to add more lanes. In addition, the group has helped Omaha's transit agency outfit buses with bike racks, so people can ride for part of their commute, or get from their home to a trail.

Another local group, Activate Omaha, designed and printed 5,000 maps to highlight the city's best streets for bicycling. The maps were distributed to bike shops, libraries and other public places. The group, which receives much of its funding from LWO, started an urban adventure bike race. Every spring for the past three years, 350 or so participants pedal around the city chasing clues from spot to spot.

In addition, both groups convinced the city to start a Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee. Last year, the city hired its first bicycle and pedestrian coordinator. This spring, to encourage drivers to respect pedalers, LWO rolled out a \$250,000 "IRide" media campaign featuring radio ads, social media, and signs at city and county DMV offices. Peterson doesn't blame Omaha drivers for their lack of understanding: "They've never had a large number of people biking in the city."

LWO and its partners have also focused on making it easier for residents to buy healthy food. On the city's east and west sides, several lower-income areas have no supermarkets, and many residents rely on convenience stores and corner markets for most of their shopping. Using just over a third of the CDC grant, LWO and its partners have attacked this problem.

First, the Douglas County Health Department surveyed all 385 food retailers in the city — everything from corner stores to supermarkets. Each outlet received a rating, which depended largely on the amount of fresh fruits, vegetables, and other healthy items. After integrating this data with information about each neighborhood's income, fruit and vegetable consumption, and obesity rate, the researchers identified the three neighborhoods that most needed healthier food.

The program is now working with eight stores in these areas to increase their selection of healthy food, and pays up to \$2,500 for the infrastructure — bins, refrigeration etc. — to store and display this food. By offering to spruce up stores, the health department succeeded in getting owners and managers interested. "If we'd

just come in and said 'we want to enhance your nutritional profile,' no one would have been interested," said Mary Balluff, who oversees the program for the city.

County agricultural extension officers also visit the stores to give training and advice on subjects such as how best to display vegetables and fruits. This isn't as simple as it might seem: for instance, bananas can't be placed next to apples and other fruits because the apples give off a gas that spoils the bananas.

Activate Omaha recently began working with city schools. This spring, Omaha schools will plant 10 school gardens. And 26 Omaha area schools, most of them in the city, have joined a Safe Routes to School program. At some schools, kids walk with parents or teachers a few times a month; at others they walk almost every day. Julie Harris, who coordinates the program for Activate

Omaha, said the group hopes to add more schools, and increase involvement at schools that are already participating. The projects are funded by several public and private groups, including CDC, RWJF, and local charities.

LWO has more projects in the works. This summer, Peterson hopes to add a mobile farmer's market: a converted snack or ice cream truck that stops at downtown offices during the week, selling fresh fruits and vegetables. The city already has four large farmer's markets, but they are only open on Saturdays and Sundays.

And she wants to keep adding bike lanes; she hopes to at least double the mileage.

The work is getting easier, she said: "In 2002, we were the only ones working on this. Now there are so many groups. It's gone a lot faster than we anticipated. We're seeing so much momentum."