

6. Spartanburg, South Carolina: Mobile Markets and Free Bikes

Spartanburg, South Carolina is in the throes of the obesity crisis. Almost two-thirds of the 250,000 people who live in the city and the surrounding county are overweight or obese. In some neighborhoods, the rates are even higher.

Ten years ago, the Mary Black Foundation, a private group based in Spartanburg, joined forces with local government and other local groups to confront this problem. The nonprofit foundation, which is dedicated to improving health in the area, decided to focus much of its attention on active living — the idea of helping people get more exercise in the course of daily life, rather than at the gym.

“We want to ensure that our efforts are sustainable, and that we reach the most people in the most places, as often as possible,” says Molly Talbot-Metz, director of programs at the Mary Black Foundation. “Gyms are great, but you have to be able to afford them. And you need to have the time to actually go. With active living, it’s built into your day. It creates a sustainable context for physical activity. We want being healthy and active to be easy, so that it becomes part of your lifestyle.”

Spartanburg, however, was not designed for active living. Like much of the country, the community is built to accommodate cars rather than people. In many places, there are no sidewalks; few streets have bike lanes. The neighborhoods where people live are often miles from where they work and shop. Many neighborhoods, especially areas where poverty rates are high, have no grocery stores, making it difficult for people living there to buy healthy food.

The foundation and its partners attacked the problem from multiple angles: they have increased opportunities for people to bicycle, walk, and do other kinds of exercise; expanded healthy food choices, especially for lower-income residents; and changed the larger policies that shape building and development in the city and county.

The first focus was bicycling. In 2005, one of the foundation’s partners, a local nonprofit called Palmetto Conservation Foundation, converted two miles of unused railroad track that ran through the city’s center into a biking and walking trail. Another partner, Partners for Active Living (PAL), created a kind of bicycle library, which loans residents refurbished bikes, along with helmets and locks, for three months at a time; the group has a fleet of almost 250 bikes, and a waiting list for rentals.

PAL coordinated the installation of more than 150 bikes racks around the city, and later this year it will roll out a program that rents bicycles for a

few hours, at a cost of a few dollars. And because many Spartanburg drivers aren’t used to sharing the road, PAL sponsored a \$25,000 media campaign — TV, radio, and street signs — to encourage respect for bicyclists and pedestrians.

Since 2005, the area has added more almost 30 miles of bike lanes, and more than 30 miles of bike and walking trails. The Mary Black Foundation has helped build support for the projects, and helped pay for some of the work. In 2007, the League of American Bicyclists named Spartanburg a “Bicycle-Friendly Community;” it was the first city in the state to receive the award.

The foundation has tried to get Spartanburg moving in other ways. It helped pay to rebuild a city recreation center in one of Spartanburg’s poorest neighborhoods, and to build a new YMCA from the ground up. Construction on that project has just begun. In recent years, the YMCA has focused on active living, and the centers in Spartanburg will work to include older people and minorities, who tend to exercise less.

In addition, the foundation helped build or refurbish seven playgrounds and parks around the county and city, in neighborhoods that lacked safe places for kids to play.

The groups are also trying to encourage more Spartanburg students to walk. With funding from the foundation and support from PAL, three city public schools have started programs that encourage kids to walk to school at least once a week; next fall, three more schools will join the program.

Food is another focus area for the foundation. Working with a nonprofit called Hub City Farmer’s Markets, it started 40 community vegetable gardens, tended by local residents, and two weekly farmers’ markets, one of which is located just off the rail trail. Every week, 30 or so farmers from Spartanburg County and other nearby counties sell fresh produce to an average of 650 customers.

The Hub City group has bought an old ice cream truck and turned it into a mobile market that sells fresh fruits and vegetables: two days a week, it sets up in lower-income neighborhoods that lack access to supermarkets. Last year, the truck added bikes to its weekly menu: it began hauling a flatbed trailer filled with PAL’s rental bikes. In part because of this partnership, most bike renters are lower-income people who don’t have cars.

Spartanburg is trying more innovative strategies too. In 2005, The Mary Black Foundation gave the Palmetto Conservation Foundation more than half a million dollars to start the Glendale

Outdoor Leadership School (GOLS). Housed in a 161-year-old former Methodist church in a small mill town outside Spartanburg, the school teaches rock climbing, mountain biking, canoeing and kayaking to anyone who's interested, including children and seniors.

Spartanburg's strategy differs from that of many other groups dealing with obesity, said Talbot-Metz. Instead of spending years, and a lot of resources, thinking about how to attack the problem, the group got its projects off the ground quickly. It began by looking for local groups to work with; when those groups didn't exist, it helped create them — PAL, for instance.

The projects are having an effect, she said: "There's a buzz about active living in the community. More people are joining our mission." For instance, Eric Turner, the owner of Bike Worx, a local bike store, relocated his shop last year from a strip mall outside the city to one end of the rail trail. On weekends, about half of his customers arrive via the trail.

This year, he used half of a \$25,000 grant from the Mary Black Foundation to build trails in a city park. With volunteers, including an expert trail builder, Turner created a 5.5-mile network of biking and walking paths, which would typi-

cally have cost more than \$100,000. With the other half of the grant, Turner bought kids' bikes for the leadership school to use in outdoor adventure camps.

Even with all their work, the foundation and its partners realize they have a long way to go. The rail trail could accommodate twice as much traffic as it now gets, and some residents don't even realize it's there; to fix this, PAL will increase marketing and promotion. And although the trail is patrolled by police on bikes, and has never had a reported robbery or violent crime, some residents worry about safety. To ease concerns, PAL plans to install cameras and call boxes along the paths.

So far, the foundation has invested more than \$6 million on active living; it has no plans to stop. Among the upcoming projects: helping to upgrade two city parks that have become so overgrown that they're barely used; and training every elementary and middle school physical education teacher in the county in a new strategy that has been shown to get kids moving both in school and at home.

"We know that this is an issue that will take a generation, or two, to fix," said Talbot-Metz. "This is a long-term investment."

