

Health Trust aims to make valley country's healthiest region

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Silicon Valley Community Newspapers

Posted: 08/12/2008 10:41:13 PM PDT
Could Silicon Valley become the healthiest region in the country in less than two years?

It won't be easy, especially considering today's staggering obesity rates, the soaring cost of health care, the aging of the population and the disparities that consign large segments of the population to an environment lacking the resources conducive to a healthy lifestyle.

But take a careful look behind the scenes at the collaborative efforts under way to make healthy living even in under-served communities the norm, and it begins to look as if meeting this challenge by 2010 is a real possibility.

If that goal is reached, it will be due in no small measure to the 1996 sale of Good Samaritan and three other nonprofit

From that sale, The Health Trust was created with \$52 million in assets and a commitment to improve the health of the residents of the county. In its first 10 years, The Health Trust pumped more than \$100 million into the community.

Now The Health Trust has a new challenge. Its board has committed \$30 million to make Silicon Valley the healthiest region in the country through three initiatives Healthy Living, Healthy Communities and Healthy Aging.

Its 10-year anniversary is what prompted the board to do a self-evaluation, and to consider its goals for the future, says Ann Danner, acting chairwoman. A longtime volunteer and consultant to nonprofit organizations, Saratoga Danner says the board realized it could make the community much healthier if it could keep more people from getting sick.

FOCUSED APPROACH

That would require a more focused approach; instead of simply giving grants to good causes, the board would have to make funding decisions based on how well a project contributed to its three initiatives. Prevention would be key.

"We realized that what would make sense would be for us to take a leadership role," says Danner. "No one else was doing that."

Last November, The Health Trust hired Fred Ferrer as CEO and charged him with implementing the ambitious goal. So far, progress has been impressive.

The Health Trust:

is in partnership with the Children's Dental Group, a private enterprise that operates successful pediatric

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hospitals to the for-profit Columbia/HCA. Proceeds of the sale had to be used to further the community work of the hospitals and to compensate taxpayers for the benefits the hospitals had received under their nonprofit status.

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dental centers in Southern California, opened the 6,000-square-foot, 14-seat, kid-friendly Children's Dental Center in the Tropicana Shopping Center at King and Story roads in East San Jose;

ó was the presenting sponsor of Body Worlds 2 and The Three Pound Gem, the exhibit of human anatomy and physiology that attracted some 275,000 visitors to the Tech Museum of Innovation;

ó made available onetime mini-grants to grass-roots, community-based or faith-based organizations to initiate discussions based on the PBS series Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?, exploring racial and social inequalities in health;

ó awarded a grant of \$25,000 and donated the time of a Vista volunteer to help launch Full Circle Farm, an 11-acre sustainable garden on the site of a former school in Sunnyvale;

ó provided a grant that made it possible for the PlaneTree Health Library to open a health research library at the new Joyce Ellington Branch Library when it opened in the Empire neighborhood of San Jose.

Getting to goal

What these accomplishments have in common is that they help further the healthiest region goal; they are collaborative efforts, and The Health Trust played a role, whether initiating a project, playing a major role or a small role. And these efforts are in addition to The Health Trust's ongoing programs, such as Meals on Wheels and direct services to AIDS clients.

HEALTHY SILICON VALLEY

Inevitably, any effort to dramatically improve

community health, must focus on the obesity epidemic. While our population as a whole is overweight, obesity hits particularly hard in poor communities where access to wholesome food and opportunities for exercise are limited. Obesity is the root cause of many health problems, not the least of which is diabetes; at current rates, for instance, it is predicted that one in two Latino children will develop diabetes.

In 2002, The Health Trust invited local foundations and the California Endowment to come together to see how they might work together to fight obesity.

By 2006, that effort was formalized as Healthy Silicon Valley with some 100 members, including Santa Clara County Department of Public Health and Kaiser Permanente, whose ""Thrive"" campaign meshed nicely with the goal of the collaborative. By staffing the meetings, taking minutes and sending out meeting notices, The Health Trust sees its role as the glue that holds the collaborative together.

"To solve obesity, you have to deal with exercise and nutrition, and that involves smart housing, schools, healthy grocery stores," says Dr. Marty Fensterseib, medical director of the county health department. "The problems are too big for any one sector to solve. What works best for us is private/public partnerships."

Health Trust CEO Ferrer speaks for Healthy Silicon Valley partners when he says the best way to change behavior is to change the environment. San Jose didn't become the "recycle capital of the world" because its residents were concerned about landfill, he argues. "We got serious about recycling when those big blue trash cans showed up on the sidewalks."

CITY PLANNING EFFORTS

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Changing the environment, as Fensterseib noted, is not an easy thing to do, and it's not something that happens overnight. That's why one element of The Health Trust's healthy living initiative is to encourage cities to build a health element into their General Plan update process.

One city currently in this process is San Jose. District 3 Councilman Sam Liccardo, co-chairs Envision San Jose 2040 General Plan Task Force. He's talked with Ferrer about planning for a healthier community.

"It's been discussed extensively by the task force, although not specifically as a health element," he says, arguing that making communities environmentally sound will inevitably make them healthier.

In looking at smart growth high-density development around transportation hubs we have to allow for parks, trails and other amenities, Liccardo says. "You have to think about things like more community gardens, which are not only places where fresh produce is grown, but which also provide great community spaces. You also have to think about farmers markets and rooftop gardens."

In communities where walking trails and parks are abundant, where grocery stores offer fresh produce and streets are safe, it's sometimes hard to imagine the dramatic impact the environment can have on lifestyles.

But in under-served communities, parents are often afraid to let their children play outside or walk to school; groceries are typically purchased at a corner market with little or no fresh produce; and parents often work more than one job and don't have time to exercise. That's why much of the focus of Healthy Silicon Valley is to address these barriers. In effect, to deliver those big blue trash cans.

"The fact is," says Ferrer, "the most vulnerable segment of the community is eating the worst food."

UPSTREAM APPROACH

Ferrer, a nationally-recognized expert on early childhood education, served for 18 years as the executive director of Estrella Family Services in the Gardner area of Willow Glen. There, working with some 300 children, from birth to 12 years, he implemented a "no-sugar" policy, believing habits established early in life carry through a lifetime.

This "upstream" approach is very much at the heart of The Health Trust's healthiest region goal and the opus operandi of Healthy Silicon Valley.

"If you see bodies floating downstream," Ferrer says, citing a commonly used example, "you can keep pulling bodies out of the water and deal with them at that stage, or you can go upstream and fix the bridge."

TWO EXAMPLES

Both the new Children's Dental Health Center and the Full Circle Farm are good examples of both the upstream approach at work as well as the way The Health Trust collaborates with the public and private sector to achieve the goals of healthy living, healthy communities and healthy aging.

It is estimated that some 120,000 children in Santa Clara County suffer from untreated tooth decay. The Health Trust has offered dental clinics in schools for years, but something more dramatic was needed. That's why the organization partnered with a private practice that runs successful clinics in Southern California. A high-efficiency business model, the new clinic can see and treat up to 15,000 dental appointments per year, with flexibility in scheduling to accommodate parents' needs.

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The Health Trust has a 10-year lease on the facility in East San Jose and funded the furniture and equipment. A variety of private and government health plans are accepted, and The Health Trust offers scholarships for those who need it.

Full Circle Farm is a nonprofit organization that operates a sustainable farm on 11 acres of surplus land owned by Santa Clara Unified School District in the city of Sunnyvale. Both the city and the school district were involved in approving the project, which will provide volunteer opportunities for families, workshops and nutrition training for students and fresh produce for sale. What's more, some 50 percent of the farm's produce will be sold at or near cost to the school district's lunch program where 56 percent of students qualify for free or reduced school lunches.

In addition to the support provided by The Health Trust, Kaiser Permanente provided a \$60,000 grant and also provides nutrition curriculum and other services. Like Good Samaritan before its sale to a for-profit corporation, Kaiser Permanente is a nonprofit hospital with an obligation to provide benefits to the community. Its Thrive campaign is a nationwide effort to deal with obesity. The funding for Full Circle Farm came from Healthy Eating Active Living, a local partnership grant program to foster sustainable changes by building wellness policies in schools, building youth leadership capacity and developing model policies and practices for business and government. Kaiser Permanente is a featured partner in Healthy Silicon Valley.

REACHING CRITICAL MASS?

So what are the chances that Silicon Valley will become the healthiest region in the country?

There are signs that the obesity crisis has caught the attention of enough entities, both private and

public, that many eyes are now focused on the single goal of solving the problem. The 100-member-strong Healthy Silicon Valley is a key player, and The Health Trust continues to provide the staffing to ensure its success and to play a role wherever it can do the most good.

These days, physical education classes are making a comeback in schools; coin-operated soda machines are disappearing from campuses; school lunch programs now pay more attention to nutritional content; and in many schools, the day begins with students taking laps around the school yard.

The county now requires restaurants in its jurisdiction to post nutrition information on menus; at senior centers, exercise is offered in many forms, and cities are beginning to think more about creating environments that will encourage healthy living.

It may just be that Silicon Valley the innovation capital of the world will soon be the healthiest region in the country, as well.

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