

How Does Your Environment Impact Your Health?

“Moving Grays Harbor”
By Maryann Welch

In reading through the Daily World a couple of weeks ago I noticed a letter to the editor questioning the need to chip seal roads around Grays Harbor. You see, the gentleman who wrote the letter was an avid bicyclist who enjoyed riding on the smooth, paved surfaces the roads originally provided. Chip sealing may be the most economic way to go, but the result is a surface that is hard on bike tires and most often drops off at the edge. This is one example of the “built environment” limiting our opportunities to be physically active. This man has to now choose different routes that may not be as convenient. His letter went on to say “I may be the only one complaining in print, but I hope someone else can explain. Why chip seal?” I don’t have the answer and I’m not sure if this is a policy that can be changed, but I applaud this man for speaking up for the needs of active people.

A co-worker of mine ran into a similar problem regarding the “built environment”. She was biking on highway 12 between Montesano and Elma and had to maneuver between the rumble strips on the side of the highway and a bridge. She thought that it was odd that highway 12 was supposed to be “bicycle friendly” yet didn’t give ample room to maneuver safely onto the roadway without traveling over the rumble strips. She contacted the

Department of Transportation and was informed that rumble strips are supposed to be discontinued a certain distance before and after any highway obstruction (for the safety of cyclists). The state employee asked where the problem was encountered and now those rumble strips are filled in, making highway 12 safer for biking. In this case, a policy for bicycle safety was already in place, but somehow was overlooked. All it took was two emails to fix the problem; never underestimate the power of one voice.

As part of the “Moving Grays Harbor” strategic plan, we hope to develop advocacy for a healthier “built environment” (roads, sidewalks, multi-use paths) with policies that improve the quality of life for residents. Future planning ideally should include a “health impact assessment” for projects from the very start. The assessment should address questions such as:

-Will (this) road project be safe and welcoming for bicycles and pedestrians?

-When (this) building is sited is there a way to connect it to other businesses or homes so that people can get from place to place without having to rely on an automobile?

There are, of course, many other considerations to make when establishing a policy that will be both feasible and responsive to the needs of our community.

I was in Ocean Shores this summer and was especially struck by the lack of sidewalks and the fact that connections between businesses centered around

driving. This is one example of a built environment that will be difficult and expensive to change. However, it would be well worth the effort to initiate positive change with every new repair/resurface project or building remodel that is scheduled.

There are many studies now that focus on the built environment and the positive effect that it can have on obesity levels and health...build it and they will come. We are all aware of the staggering levels of obesity in Grays Harbor. Changing this will take individual efforts as well as work to create a health-promoting infrastructure. The time has come to look toward the future of this county and the health impacts our planning efforts can make. We need quality sidewalks, shoulders, bike lanes and trails if we want to thrive and prosper in the future. This should be a consideration in all new developments as well as renovations. Let your city councils, county planners, county commissioners and state representatives know how you feel. Visit these pedestrian and bicycle advocacy web sites for more information on active community environments and the built environment: www.feetfirst.info; www.bicyclealliance.org.

This week's challenge

Take a walk around your own neighborhood. Are there existing and continuous sidewalks? Are shoulders wide enough to give you room to walk? Are drivers respectful of pedestrians (yielding in crosswalks, moving toward the center line when passing)? Let someone in your local government know what you find. Hopefully, in the near future, you can answer yes to all of these questions!

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If you have questions about becoming more active or have information about free or low-cost activity in the area, contact the health department at 532-8665 ext. 483, e-mail us at moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us or visit our web site at www.ghphss.org.