

County Wellness Coalition asks planners for more accessibility to schools, churches

BY ELIZABETH COUNCIL

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The Ottawa County Wellness Coalition is stepping up its efforts to get county residents moving and keeping their weight down.



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Abby Dressander, co-chair of the coalition's government subcommittee, briefed county planning commissioners Monday night on how they can help residents lead a more active lifestyle. "Obesity is rising at an alarming rate," Dressander told the commission. "Not only is it causing health concerns, but it's causing health care costs to rise." The coalition found that in Ottawa County, the three leading causes of death — heart disease, cancer, and stroke — are directly linked to obesity.

The coalition asked planning commissioners to make it easier for residents to get active by amending zoning ordinances to require walking paths through neighborhoods, biking routes, hiking trails and more recreation space. "We would very much like to get more planners involved (in the coalition)," Dressander said. "Slowly but surely, we're making some big changes."

The Ottawa County Wellness Coalition, under the Health Department, was formed last year to help combat the rise in obesity and unhealthy lifestyles within the county. The coalition is a collaboration of local agencies, businesses and health care providers in the area. According to one study conducted by the coalition, nearly all Americans will be overweight by the year 2020.

The coalition suggested zoning changes to allow for narrow, interconnected neighborhood streets that are more conducive to walking and biking to schools, churches and businesses. Recommendations also include providing lighted sidewalks and pathways, and more green space for recreation and safety between streets and sidewalks. The coalition suggested county officials lead by example and get moving themselves. It suggested officials lead communitywide health assessments and community/workplace exercise and wellness programs. It also suggested smoke-free policies in work sites and public gathering spaces.

Dressander said the coalition is working with the county to make all county buildings smoke-free. She said this could benefit the county by lowering health care costs. The coalition believes greater accessibility for everyday travels will allow residents an option to make healthy lifestyle choices. "People are influenced and make decisions based on their environment or community," Dressander said. "For example, a person may choose not to walk to the store because of a lack of sidewalks. It is important to create environments that make it easier to engage in physical activity and to make healthy food choices in smoke-free conditions."