

Confronting the Epidemic We Don't See

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – October 28, 2012

Obesity epidemic...

Perhaps you think of overweight children or adults. Maybe you're offended at labeling someone "obese" or telling them how to live their lives. What you probably didn't think about is the word "epidemic."

We have ready images for "obese." But, most of us -- in the United States at least -- have no experience with epidemics.

Those alive in the 1940s or 1950s may remember Polio; HIV and Hepatitis C have taken their toll in recent decades. But most Americans have no real exposure to illness on an explosive scale.

Or, rather, we have it; we just don't recognize it. The effects of obesity are found in the death tolls of heart disease, stroke, and diabetes. As the obesity rate among American adults has risen to 35.7%, according to the Centers for Disease Control, there is no denying the epidemic status.

I saw graphic evidence last weekend at the Georgia-Illinois Bike Summit in Augusta, as non-profits Georgia Bikes and the Palmetto Cycling Coalition gathered for a two-state conference on bicycling. Keynote Speaker Jeffrey Miller, President and CEO of the Alliance for Biking and Walking, shared a compelling story with attendees over Saturday lunch.

The coalition publishes an annual benchmarking report with national and state data for levels of walking and biking, rates of accidents and deaths, and tallies of state-by-state investments. What was most compelling in Miller's talk were the correlations between higher levels of walking and biking and lower rates of illnesses like diabetes and heart disease.

Miller took the audience on a frightening trip through time as he flashed up color-code maps of the US from 1990 to 2009 showing unbelievable growth in obesity rates across the 50 states.

How compelling? In 1990, no state had an obesity rate greater than 14%. Half were in the 10-14% range. Then, in a year-by-year progression, Miller clicked through a series of slides revealing an explosion of new colors on the map (especially in the southeast), as new levels of obesity necessitated new markers. By 2009, not a single state was below 15%. Only one, Colorado, was below 20%. Nine states topped 30%, and about half

were in the 25-29% range. It was a jaw-dropping demonstration – a nation transformed in 20 years' time.

Next up, Miller shared a graph with two trend lines. One, the obesity rate among children, was a steep slope rising to the right from a low of less than 5% in the 1960s to a high in 2009 of nearly 18%. Over that same period, the percent of children walking or biking to school plummeted from 45% to less than 10%.

Coincidence? Not based on other data Miller shared. The Alliance's benchmarking report provides a biannual view of data in each state. Miller showed walking and biking rates in each state plotted against the percentage of adults achieving the minimum recommended physical activity level of 30 minutes per day. Not surprisingly, there was a direct correlation between walking and biking frequency and physical activity rates overall.

Then, Miller showed a similar graph pairing walking and biking levels with the incidence of diabetes. Again the correlation was irrefutable: the higher levels of walking and biking, the lower the incidence of diabetes. Where did Georgia rank? We are third from the bottom for the levels of biking and walking, but near the top (along with our fellow southern states) on the incidence of diabetes. Even South Carolina, which scored seventh on walking and biking, was able to look down on us at the summit! It's sad from a competitive standpoint, but tragic from a human health and quality of life perspective.

Far from a doom-and-gloom scenario, Miller told tales of communities and businesses investing in walking and biking to realize tangible savings and improved health. For less than the cost of one mile of urban freeway, Portland, Oregon has built a bicycle and pedestrian network that is the envy of America.

The Eastside Trail in Covington, Yellow River Park in Porterdale, and a pedestrian bridge over I-20... These are investments that pay off. Jeffrey Miller can show you the numbers.

