

NEWS

Leading the way

Fitness guru Mark Fenton tours Hernando

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HERNANDO — Nationally renowned fitness expert Mark Fenton said Hernando officials are leading the way towards amenities which make the DeSoto County seat a walkable and physically fit community.

The region and the nation as a whole need to do more to promote physical fitness and curb obesity.

Fitness, community health and overall quality of life were high on the agenda at the winter conference of the Bouchillon Institute which was sponsored by the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi through a Healthy Kids Healthy Communities Grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Fenton, an athlete, public television star and fitness guru, led a group of about 70 community leaders from across the Mid-South on a walking tour of Hernando, stopping along the way to point out positive things such as Hernando's Public Library having easy street accessibility for walk-up foot traffic along with improvements which need to be made such as replacing uneven sidewalks.



Andrew Trippel, Memphis Coordinator for the Urban Land Institute, along with nationally renowned fitness guru Mark Fenton lead a walkabout in downtown Hernando on Friday as part of the A.W. Bouchillon Institute Winter Conference.

Fenton noted a "thriving downtown" with progressive things such as recycling receptacles alongside garbage bins in the downtown area.

During a walk through the West End section of Hernando, Fenton stopped at a blues marker commemorating blues musicians who went on to fame on Beale Street in Memphis.

Fenton said the city should continue to celebrate its "economic, professional and cultural diversity" as it incorporated efforts to promote walkability around town.

The Hernando Community Garden, adjacent to city hall and near disadvantaged neighborhoods as well as the downtown square is a positive step in that direction, according to Fenton.

During a lunchtime seminar, Fenton turned his attention towards the anti-obesity efforts which Hernando Mayor Chip Johnson and Community Foundation officials have championed.

"The more physically active kids are the less they act out in the classroom and they do better academically," Fenton said.

Peggy Linton, community development director for the Community Foundation, said her organization remains committed to battling childhood obesity in the region.

"We have worked on childhood obesity since 2005," Linton said, noting the Hernando and DeSoto County community is one of 50 Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities working to promote healthy lifestyle choices.

A community also has to make good planning choices when promoting public health issues as a matter of policy.

"Just as you wouldn't put a liquor store near a school, nor should you put a fast food joint," Fenton said. "More walkable neighborhoods also mean higher housing values. The next generation of Americans wants to be able to walk their kids to a corner park."

Mayor Chip Johnson, who has become somewhat of a national fitness spokesman for small town America, said there are economic incentives for being a health community.

"We need to position ourselves to be a place where people want to live," Johnson said.

Fenton offered other creative proposals for Hernando.

Such radical concepts as reverse diagonal parking need to be explored in order to install bike lanes safely in downtown areas, Fenton said.

Curbs should be extended into the street as traffic calming devices and landscaped areas can help reduce stormwater.

City Planning Director Bob Barber, who acted as host and emcee for the event, said training is critical. In fact, several Mid-South planning officials received training credit for attending Friday's seminar.

"Lay people are often asked to make critical design plans when building communities," Barber said.

Byhalia Mayor Phil Malone said he learned a great deal from the conference.

"I've learned how small things can make a difference," Malone said.

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