

Walkabout steps up ideas for Hernando

Consultant offers tips to make city pedestrian friendly

By Henry Bailey

baileyhank@desotoappeal.com

With a utility box as his impromptu platform at Elm and West South streets, former Olympic speed walker Mark Fenton urged about 50 fellow hikers — regional officials, planners and activists — to trot out impressions of the Hernando intersection's "walkability." More signs are needed to point to the nearby square and to historical places, some said. No shade, others noted. The positives cited during last week's Bouchillon Institute for Community Planning event: wide sidewalks, the community garden to the north, and the conference site itself just west.

"The garden is a walkable destination and shows an effort to model community behavior, and the Gale Center is an adaptive use of an old warehouse," said Fenton, a nationally recognized public health and transportation consultant. "Brilliant, if you ask me."

Later, on the square at U.S. 51 and Loshier Street, he had people form the outline of a "bump - out" curb extension that he said could aid pedestrian- crossing safety and visitor appeal, possibly with benches, lighting and maps.

The hourlong "walkabout ," part of Fenton's presentation to about 80 people at the daylong session, was to identify what's working and what needs work based on grass-roots realities.

The conference was sponsored by the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi through a Healthy Communities-Healthy Families grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation .

"That was a good exercise — mentally and physically," Mayor Chip Johnson said of the event. "My engineer, Joe Frank Lauderdale, was taking notes like crazy."

Lauderdale and others said some ideas appear very do-able, such as murals, restriping for turns and bicycle lanes and tapping adopt-astreet programs to clean litter. Other ideas call for more dialogue, such as "reverse angle" parking on the square, in which cars back in to boost safety for bicyclists.

Fenton says walkability "isn't an amenity," it's a necessary defense against "the twin epidemics of physical inactivity and poor nutrition" linked to about 365,000 deaths annually across the country, and it should be a matter of public policy and planning. He urges programs to promote walking to school and "free-range kids" with places and options for unstructured play and developing social skills.

"It was fun — and an education," Tracy Huffman, consulting engineer for De-Soto County, said of the walk. "It's more enjoyable than sitting through a design seminar — plus, I have two kids." For more Bouchillon information, call (662) 449-5002, e-mail TheBouchillonInstitute@gmail.com or visit the website at bicp.wordpress.com.

— Henry Bailey: (901) 333-2012