

SPECIAL REPORT

'We're hopeful. We're moving.'

In Braxton County, fitness is economic development, too

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KATE LONG / SUNDAY GAZETTE-MAIL

SUTTON — Sutton Mayor J.L. Campbell was directing traffic for the yearly 5-kilometer run/walk. "I was interested to see so many heavy people out there walking and running. I admired that."



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He talked with a few. "They told about their health problems and said how hard it is to change your lifestyle when your doctor tells you to, when there aren't good places to run or

work out or activities to join.

It was a light bulb moment. "It hit me right there that we, as a town, could be doing a lot more to help them."

A few weeks ago, he strolled down Main Street, pointing here and there. "We're trying," he said. "We have to work on this in bits and pieces because sometimes we can barely pay the fire department and utilities."

"Down there, we got the state to put a bike lane in," he said, gesturing. "A block over, we're marking off streets so people can tell how far they've walked. We repaired this stretch of sidewalk."

They're letting local exercise teachers teach rent-free in the community building. So far, they've got toning and zumba classes and dancing. "Now people are asking for yoga."

This is how it is for a small town with limited money, he said. "Step by step. You have to get creative."

"Fitness is economic development too . . . If you make your town healthier for people who live there, it attracts outsiders and employers. Anymore, people want to visit or move to a community with a lot of fitness activities. If they see a farmers market and biking and canoeing, they like that."

J.L. CAMPBELL
Sutton mayor

Most of Braxton County — with a per capita income of \$19,000 — is in the same boat. The schools can't afford soccer, for instance, with no excess levy. Instead of giving up, parents started a league.

They've got 20 volunteer coaches and about 180 kids. The county leased them land near Flatwoods for near-nothing.

"Towns all over the state are in the same boat," Campbell said. "No money."

West Virginia is once again named the nation's least healthy state by Gallup Healthways. Campbell wonders about the billion-plus dollars that state government has stashed away in rainy day funds. "If this isn't a rainy day, what is?" Campbell said. He'd like to see some set aside for funding for small-town healthy-living projects. "That would give us something to organize around."

Sutton has an economic development plan. It says the former logging town could make a fine arts town. Campbell imagines crafters filling now-empty buildings, and visitors, walkers and bicyclers filling the streets, with paddlers in the river.

For now, it's step by step. Last month, they got a small grant to fix up a hiking/biking trail and plan another. "We thought we'd have an 8-mile river trail to Gass-away, so we can have mountain biking," but it's on hold. One landowner doesn't want people crossing her land. "Can't get discouraged," Campbell said. "Maybe she'll change her mind."

"We need river access," he said, nodding toward the Elk. "We live by a beautiful river that's been designated as a scenic river trail, but there's no public access point in town." The state's working on that, he said.

Another light bulb is flashing in the mayor's thinking. "Fitness is economic development," he said. "If you make your town healthier for people who live there, it attracts outsiders and potential employers. Anymore, people want to visit or move to a community with a lot of fitness activities. If they see a farmers market and biking and canoeing, they like that."

"About 80,000 people a day drive by the I-79 Sutton exit. We only need to attract half a percent," he said. Sutton Lake is nearby. If Sutton had a dock, people who now paddle past might stop, walk into



Sutton's Mayor J.L. Campbell believes the arts and fitness activities such as biking and boating can help revive his 1,000-person hometown while they make it easier for residents to get fit. Behind him, a burned-out building is being gutted to create a huge sculpture studio and teaching area inside.



ABOVE: Every spring, Sutton citizens sponsor a cleanup day, with a party in the evening.

LEFT: With no soccer in the schools, Braxton parents created a nonprofit league for almost 200 children. Rick Riffle of Flatwoods is one of 20 volunteer coaches. "Volunteers are one of Braxton County's greatest assets," Campbell says. "It's a way of being there for my daughter," Riffle adds.



Lex deGruij, owner of Sutton's P.J. Berry's restaurant, expects new recreation activities — hiking, biking, boating — will bring in new customers. With an eclectic menu and microbrew beer, "we're ready for them," he says.



Girl Scouts scribble encouraging messages on windows of empty buildings.



Sutton is enrolled in the state's Main Street ON TRAC program, which provides planning help and small grants. Dot Gioulis and VISTA worker Rebecca Conrad attended a March seminar on fitness activities as tools for economic development.

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town and spend money.

Halfway down Main Street, at P.J. Berry's restaurant, owner Lex deGruyl heard that Mingo County's diabetes association holds monthly 5K run/walks. "If we did that, maybe some runners would come eat a good meal afterward," he said.



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Campbell plans to take a road trip soon to find out how towns like Fayetteville, Ansted and Alderson have made fitness work for them. He read about Williamson community groups working together to create healthy projects. "If they can do it in Mingo, we should be able to do it in Braxton."

Then there are the kids. "We've got a lot of overweight kids. They could get diabetes. If we can get our town more active, it'll help get the kids more active too."

"I'm hearing a new energy when people talk about this. I think people are concerned about their kids' health and fitness, and they want to talk about what we can do."

DELEGATE BRENT BOGGS
D-Braxton

One in four children

A year ago, the headline of the first story in this series read: "One in four W.Va. 11-year-olds has high blood pressure, cholesterol, obesity." West Virginia University screened them, so those are real numbers, not estimates.

The story started with an unidentified Braxton 14-year-old with dangerously high blood pressure and weight. Her heart doctor, West Virginia University's Bill Neal, said she would be diabetic if she didn't get regular exercise.

But Braxton had no regular exercise for teens who aren't on sports teams, public health nurse Sissy Price told the Gazette-Mail. "I wish I could tell you we have something for them," she said. "We've got plenty of kids like that." They're on their way to diabetes, she said, "but it's gotten so common for a child to be that heavy, I think people forget it's dangerous."

"The day after that Gazette-Mail story came out, the phone rang off the hook," she said. She was afraid people were calling to hassle her for being candid, "but they were calling to offer help," she said. "They were saying 'Let's do something.'"

Braxton's not alone, Neal said. "We have thousands of pre-diabetic, obese children all over the state. If we can get them moving now, we'll prevent a lot of diabetes and save the state a lot of money."

In Braxton, they started meeting, people from the schools, business, DHHR and some parents. "We were saying, what can we do together?" said Dawn Dooley, the high school principal. "No one agency can solve this problem."

They talked about the low level of physical activity at school. "The high school schedule has very little wiggle room," Dooley said. "Kids learn better when they exercise, but PE's been crowded out by required courses." High-schoolers get only one semester of phys ed in four years, she said. Middle-schoolers are required to have a half hour a day for 18 weeks, then none required the rest of the year.

They wanted to create something for girls who aren't on teams. Dooley let a zumba teacher teach classes after school rent-free, if she'd let students come free. But the teacher couldn't start till 5 o'clock, when students had gone home. But paying adults filled her classes.

They researched funding for a year-round community recreation center, "but we didn't



KATE LONG | Sunday Gazette-Mail photos

Last week after church, members of the Christ Church United Methodist surrounded "the hole" where they hope to build a three-story recreation center. "We want this to be something for the whole community," says Pastor Doug Smailes (left).



ABOVE: Mechanic Harry Page, 46, of Sutton, likes the idea of more outdoor opportunities for his son, Reese, 11. "Parents need to take every opportunity to keep their kids busy with activities that might keep them away from drugs," he says.

RIGHT: Mark Wine of Burnsville takes his elementary-age son to wrestling practice at the high school after school. "I want him to be active and keep his weight down, so I really appreciate these volunteer coaches," he says.



ABOVE: The Landmark Studio (steeple), a theater in a former church, is considered Sutton's No. 1 arts asset. Last month, 30 children performed to packed houses in a musical production.

RIGHT: Braxton County High School stays open after school for college classes and sports practices. Principal Dawn Dooley plans to add more physical activity opportunities for students not on athletic teams.

To read more of "The Shape We're In" series:
www.theshapewerein.wordpress.com

Where can towns find planning help?

Communities that want to offer more healthy activities as part of economic development can find technical help at:

- The West Virginia Development Office: The Main Street program offers two such programs (ON TRAC and Main Street). About 30 communities are involved. The Flex-E-grant program offers small grants to nonprofits for healthy community projects. www.wvmainstreet.org or 304-558-2234 or 1-800-982-3386.

- The nonprofit WV Community Development HUB: At least 40 communities participate in the HubCAP and Blueprint programs. Coaches guide participants through development activities and help them connect with funding sources, service providers, and each other. www.wvhub.org or 304-566-7332.

- The West Virginia Bureau of Public Health: Specialists in healthy community activities can help communities plan next steps to increase opportunities for physical activity and healthy diet. Call Jessica Wright, 304-356-4193.

community if they could pull it off," Price said. But people haven't gotten together yet to talk about ways they could help them do it.

They must raise more than a million dollars, and the church district must approve it, "so it'll happen on God's time, but a blind person can see how much it's needed," Smailes said.

And then, there are volunteers who just jump in and do things as needs arise:

- A few years ago, Sutton-area parents built a football field for pee-wee football with their own money and land. "About 40 people came every work day," said Gary Ellison, county commissioner.

- Some Sutton citizens got tired of no hiking and biking trail, so they cut a three-mile trail through Army Corp of Engineers land, with Corps permission. Now, every year, they hold a trail cleanup day.

- After school, if a Sutton boy or girl can get to Flatwoods for practice and games, they can play in the parent-run soccer club. Boys can get into volunteer-run wrestling at the high school.

"All over the county, people are trying," Price said. "It's just not coordinated or anything."

"There is so much potential in Braxton County," said Monica Miller, director of the state's Main Street program. "If they ever want to apply for a big grant, they won't have much trouble showing they've tried to help themselves." They're ahead of the game in that, but most funders, federal and private, also require coordinated group planning these days, she said.

Coming together

Delegate Brent Boggs, D-Braxton, wants to bring people together this spring or summer — government, schools, health, churches, volunteers, parents — to inventory what's already been done for fitness countywide "and talk about how we can build on that."

"I'm hearing a new energy when people talk about this," he said. "I think people are concerned about their kids' health and fitness, and they want to talk about what we can do."

For every community, there's a right time to do effective planning," Miller said. "Maybe this is theirs."

They have new tools to work with. A school-based health center opened in January at the high school. And earlier this year, Braxton doubled the hotel/motel tax, to close to \$200,000 a year. The county commission made application forms so towns could apply for part of that money. Campbell plans to get a copy.

Campbell also wants to start a canoe and kayak rental business this summer "We're hopeful," he said. "We're moving." The town owns the parking next to the Methodist Church lot, he said. "Suppose we could end up with a recreation center next to an athletic field on the town's lot, next to the community pool with a river access point?" he said. These are dreams, he said, but "sometimes it's a matter of getting everybody talking and tying all the bits and pieces together."

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