

BROWNSVILLE, TX: A COMMUNITY PRESCRIPTION FOR BICYCLING

In Brownsville, Texas, creating a healthy city is an inside-out approach. In this border town, officials and advocates recognize that changing residents' behaviors comes from letting them lead the way.

Over the past decade, Brownsville has been working to address high rates of diabetes and obesity in a largely Spanish-speaking population by embracing the intersecting challenges that lead to poor health — and zeroing in on community engagement.

One of the solutions: Making Brownsville more bike-friendly.

“Poverty, jobs, education, health are all connected, and you can’t really examine one without the other,” City Commissioner Rose Gowen told the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation last year. “We knew that health did not belong in a silo.”

Starting in 2001, the University of Texas began a partnership with the city that didn’t put residents under the microscope but invited them into the process to co-create prescriptions for better health. From that inclusive effort, a long-range plan called Imagine Brownsville developed measurable, shared goals — including a strong focus on increasing active transportation options.

“It should be possible to ride your bike to a bus stop, put your bike on a



Open streets event in Brownsville, Texas

bus and use your bike when you get off a bus,” Gowen told RWJF. “That’s what we’re striving for.”

To move that aspiration forward, “Brownsville In Motion” keeps residents engaged with community meetings and an interactive website to solicit feedback, identify issues of safety and violence that need to be addressed to enable outdoor activity, and to galvanize support for city policies — like the installation of more than 30 miles of bike lanes in the past two years and a commitment to ensuring every Brownsville resident live within a half-mile radius from a bike trail.

In 2014, the city launched CycloBia, a series of open streets events that close the roads to cars and liberate them for bicyclists and pedestrians. In less than a year, the event grew from 2,000 to more than 12,000 participants eager to celebrate the joy and health of a transportation system of, by and for the people.

And this is just the beginning. In 2014,

Gowen and other city leaders welcomed the League and Alliance for Biking & Walking to host an Advocacy Advance workshop in Brownsville.

We can’t wait to see how they advance solutions at the intersection of health and bicycle advocacy.

—Carolyn Szczepanski