



Minn. city's get-healthy effort called a success

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ALBERT LEA, Minn. – Hardware store owner and heart attack survivor Leo Aeikens spent most of his life with a hankering for meat, cheese and ice cream. But an ambitious effort aimed at making his entire southern Minnesota city healthier has Aeikens calling himself a vegan and weighing 25 pounds less in just 10 months.

The 69-year-old's radical lifestyle change came as part of the "Vitality Project," an endeavor spearheaded by adventurer and travel writer Dan Buettner and AARP with major funding from United Health Foundation. Organizers say the project has added several years to the lives of Albert Lea residents through improved diet, exercise and living habits.

With organizers' help, the city crammed five years of sidewalk and bike trail construction into a year to make exercise easier for its 18,000 residents. Restaurants added healthier menu options and grocery stores showcased wholesome foods. People snacked on fruits and veggies and ate less fast food.

Schools stopped celebrating birthdays with sugary treats and started setting up "walking buses" that allowed kids to walk to and from school together with adult supervision. Employers gave workers time to exercise.

Organizers said the first-of-its kind experiment added an average 3.1 years to the expected longevity of participating residents as calculated by something called a "vitality compass," an interactive tool in which participants answered 35 lifestyle questions.

Buettner hatched the idea and oversaw the project after identifying five areas around the world where people tend to live longer and healthier lives, research he documented

in a 2008 book, "The Blue Zones."

The key for Albert Lea was getting the community behind a goal that was not just about weight loss, but also about fostering family relationships, a sense of purpose and healthy living habits, Buettner said.

Bob Furland, manager of the city's two ice rinks, said he and his wife used to grab fast food several times a week while shuttling two teenagers to sports and school activities. Now, they plan meals and keep fruits and vegetables around for snacking. They planted a vegetable garden and take regular evening walks together.

"It's funny, once you cut out the bad stuff, you go back to it and it doesn't taste as good anymore," said Furland, 46, who lost about 15 pounds and added three years to his life expectancy, according to his survey.

AARP, a nonprofit organization for people over age 50, supported the project because its members want to live longer and better, said Cathy Ventura-Merkel, senior vice president of publications.

United Health Foundation put up \$750,000 and AARP an undisclosed additional sum, Ventura-Merkel said. The money paid for consulting and licensing costs and for experts who worked with residents on things like eating and cooking better, setting up community gardens and walking programs, and publicity.

Mayor Mike Murtaugh said the city had little expense other than some staff time.

The "vitality compass" includes basic questions about gender, age and weight, then covers food choices, exercise frequency, work and relationship happiness, and how many times a person has been angry, depressed or anxious in the previous week. The average gain of 3.1 years was based on

participants who answered the questions at both the beginning and end of the experiment. Organizers said 2,300 people answered the questions at the beginning, and about 1,000 of those also did at the end.

Asked about the scientific value of the compass, Ventura-Merkel called it an effective tool.

"It doesn't give you your answers, it doesn't give you anything definitive. It's more directional," she said. "It helps you learn the behaviors that will help you add longevity."

Vitality Project backers call it more than a weight-loss effort. But Melissa Nelson, a food and nutrition professor at the University of Minnesota, said the project offers hope to researchers frustrated by persistent obesity.

"A lot of health professionals are buying into the idea that this is a problem we're going to have to tackle in a lot of different ways," Nelson said. "This idea of a community approach is something a lot of people are really getting excited about."

Outside Lakeview Elementary on Tuesday afternoon, adults shepherded a large group of children headed home in a "walking bus."

Judy Dilling, 60, was escorting her two grandchildren the mile to their house, which didn't happen before the project. Dilling also has joined a group dubbed the "Walkie Talkies" and now walks the mile-and-a-half home from her part-time job instead of driving.

"It's invigorating," she said.

The organized portion of the program drew to a close with a community celebration Tuesday night, but residents were confident they'd formed lasting habits.

"I always thought being meatless would be a horrible way to live," Aeikens said. "But there are oodles of things that are tasty and good, vegetables and fruits that really make up a good diet. I wouldn't go back."