

Homegrown health

By **JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer** | **Posted: Monday, March 17, 2014 6:00 am**

Berrien County is loaded with people who are overweight, don't get enough exercise and don't eat a lot of fresh fruits and vegetables.

It's also top-heavy with farms and markets that provide locally grown produce, along with a ton of places to walk, run and play.

Not knowing where to buy a Michigan peach or walk along a Lake Michigan beach should no longer be an alibi with Be Healthy Berrien's new websites, beactiveberrien.org and eatlocalberrien.org.

"We're doing our best to take all the excuses away," said John Egelhaaf, executive director of the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, which compiled the websites.

Be Healthy Berrien is a partnership of Berrien County Health Department, Lakeland HealthCare, Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, United Way of Southwest Michigan, Benton Harbor-St. Joseph YMCA, and Niles-Buchanan YMCA.

Its goal is to reduce obesity, and it is funded through a \$140,000 grant from Gov. Rick Snyder's 4x4 plan to promote a healthier lifestyle.

Informing residents about the local food system is one of the missions of the planning commission, Egelhaaf said.

Eatlocalberrien.org provides an interactive map that locates farms, markets, produce stands, retail outlets, and Consumer-Supported Agriculture operations, through which customers can reserve a portion of a farm's yield for the season and have it delivered.

The website also provides directions and hours of operation, and includes recipes and schedules of craft demonstrations and musical performances at venues.

Kris Martin, an assistant with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, grew up in the country but even he was surprised with the cornucopia of fresh food choices available.

The listings give people more options, he said. Now, if they miss a weekly farmers market, they can find an alternative, or find a market on their route to work.

Farms and markets can sign up to have their place included.

Beactiveberrien.org provides maps that pinpoint beaches, playgrounds, kayak and canoe launches, nature areas, golf courses, parks, trails, playgrounds and indoor recreation sites.

Visitors to the site can select activities from baseball to yoga, and learn where they can participate.

Nicki Britten, director of community health planning for the county health department, said she hopes that beactiveberrien.org shows that exercise doesn't have to be expensive.

"Especially with physical activity, it can be easy for certain trails or parks to go unnoticed by many people, or for people to think that they have to have a gym membership to be active," Britten said. "We wanted to showcase that you don't necessarily need a lot of equipment or pay for a membership to move your body."

Egelhaaf said he likes to run along the bluff in St. Joseph, using the resources that are already available. Participating in a variety of activities can keep you moving, he said.

Fitness fans can include their own favorite place to work up a sweat.

Britten said the websites could be a shot in the arm for the local economy.

"I think the websites have a large potential to increase the amount of attention for local businesses, whether that be businesses that are near parks and recreation or food businesses being promoted," she said. "There is also the ability to let tourists know about certain businesses and opportunities that they might not have found very easily on their own. Hopefully we are helping to drive more tourists to our local businesses."

No transportation to get outside or to a market? No problem.

The beactiveberrien.org website includes a link to "My Way There," with information about public transportation and other alternative modes of getting around.

There are also links to Healthy Michigan 4x4, the state's initiative; Let's Move, First Lady Michelle Obama's effort to reduce childhood obesity; and the Michigan Department of Community Health, with information on maintaining physical and mental health.

Statistics show that Berrien County residents could use a little push off the couch and away from junk food.

According to the county health department, 71 percent of residents were either overweight or obese in 2011.

That leads to high rates of heart disease, hypertension, high cholesterol and diabetes.

The health department further reports that 30 percent of the county's adults reported they get no physical activity beyond that of daily living, and 82.9 percent eat less than five servings of fruits and vegetables a day, the recommended amount for a healthy diet.

Snyder's 4x4 plan asks residents to pay attention to four measures of health - body mass index (a measure of body fat based on height and weight), blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar/glucose levels.

It further asks Michiganders to adopt four habits to improve their health - eating a healthy diet, getting regular exercise, having an annual physical exam and avoiding tobacco.

Be Healthy Berrien's signature event last year was the Million Mile Challenge, which allowed residents to log their physical fitness activities in an effort to reach the collective goal.

Fitness enthusiasts racked up more than 600,000 miles between May and September. The Million Mile Challenge returns this spring.

Information on Be Healthy Berrien is available at www.behealthyberrien.org or on their Facebook page.

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