

Blue Zones Project Promotes Health and the Built Environment

BY LINDA SECHRIST



Central Avenue looking east toward Tenth Street South

Today's primary public health problems are chronic diseases, rather than the infectious diseases that plagued America in a past century. Additionally, the dispersal of populations to suburban areas and the separation between residential and business areas—measures urged 100 years ago to improve public health—are now contributing to chronic health problems. The spread-out design of suburbs has increased reliance on the automobile, which contributed to a sedentary lifestyle and obesity.

The built environment, shaped by law and governmental decisions, significantly affects everyone's health. According to the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, in Boston, what can be built in which location is regulated by a complex set of local, state and federal laws drawn up without the input and insight from public health advocates.

The school's Nature, Health, and the Built Environment program, which notes that lacking access to nature contributes to the emotional and physical stress of urban life, also encourages growing cities to design neighborhoods and commons that promote human health. Their research, which reveals that city dwellers rely on urban parks to provide a space for recreation, relaxation and restoration, also suggests that even small amounts of daily contact with nature can help us think more clearly, reduce our stress and improve our physical health.

"Southwest Florida's Blue Zones Project applauds the city of Naples for applying Blue Zones inspired connectivity in their Third Avenue South and Central Avenue road projects. The Naples Blue Zone Marquee Project, currently underway, will connect the Gordon River Greenway to Naples Beach by means of Central Avenue. Connecting destinations not only increases safety, but also makes walking and biking more desirable, shifting reliance to a more bike- and pedestrian- friendly environment. This makes communities healthier and more active places to live," says Deb Logan, Blue Zones project executive director for Southwest Florida.

The new Big Corkscrew Island Regional Park, located in eastern Collier County, is now in the planning stages under the direction of Collier County Parks and Recreation. The park's top amenities will include walking and biking paths, which are the most requested amenities by local citizens.

"Our collective journey to rediscover the wholeness of our nature requires an intimate direct sensory connection with nature. It's the single most important cooperative action we are asked to engage in at this moment to reestablish appropriate optimism for the future. The new park and greenway will give us more opportunity to do engage with Nature," says Applied EcoPsychologist and nationally Certified NatureConnect facilitator Janet Weisberg, who helps individuals to re-engage all their senses and activate the whole brain.

Funded by the NCH Healthcare System, the Blue Zones Project now encompasses Collier County, as well as the communities of Bonita Springs and Estero. Since the community kick-off in November 2016, the project has been helping nearly 8,000 individuals and more than 230 worksites, schools, restaurants, grocery stores, homeowners' associations, faith-based organizations, clubs and small

businesses that have personally pledged to implement Blue Zone best practices that result in a healthier lifestyle, lower health costs and increased well-being.

Upcoming restudies in Collier county regarding zoning and the built environment include the rural fringe mixed-use district, Golden Gate Estates, Immokalee, and the Rural Lands Stewardship Area (RLSA), which is a critical area for wildlife habitat, flow-ways, agriculture, etc.

For more information on the Blue Zones Project, visit SouthWestFlorida.BlueZones.com. For more information on Project NatureConnect, email Janet@53Senses.com or call 239-280-8299.

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