

Detroit gobbles 'Fat City' lead from Houston

Mo' fat in Motown Detroit gobbles lead from Houston

By ANDREW GUY JR.,
Copyright 2004 Houston Chronicle
Jan 5, 2004

Was it the coney dogs? The cold weather? The Greek food? Too many cars? The casinos? Pollution from the car plants? The mayor with the earring?

Why did Men's Fitness choose Detroit as the fattest city in America?

Who cares?

Better them than us.

Houston is happy to participate in this baton-passing. We can return to overindulging in barbecue, steak smothered 10 ways, fried foods and beer without guilt. The fantastic editors at Men's Fitness have given us a break, naming Motown Fat Town.

We're No. 2! We're No. 2!

Whew!

H Town and The D could be considered soul mates. Urban sprawl. Strip malls galore. Cars everywhere. Stubborn, up-by-the-bootstraps residents. A downtown with crumbling buildings. A harsh climate.

Houstonians nest. Detroiters hibernate. They hunker down during the early days of winter and stay that way. For months. They shovel down food and run from their heated homes to their heated cars to their heated office buildings.

Likely the only exercise they get.

"It gets cold up here, and people don't want to exercise," said Grace Keros, manager at American Coney Island restaurant in downtown Detroit. "They eat, and that's it. We don't get out much and move around." But when they do get out, they eat.

Coney dogs.

For some strange reason, Detroit -- and Michigan in general -- is inundated with dog shops. Hundreds of coney places dot southeastern Michigan from Detroit to Ann Arbor to Flint.

American Coney Island, for example, has been anchored at Detroit's Michigan Avenue and Lafayette Street for 78 years.

Men's Fitness assessed the 50 largest cities in the United States in 14 categories, including air quality, climate, commute time, number of fast-food and pizza restaurants and number of health clubs and sporting-goods stores.

Houston spent three years atop the magazine's fat list. The city's drop to No. 2 is a significant step, the magazine's editors say, because habits are hard to change.

The fat-city list appears in the magazine's February issue, on newsstands this week.

Howard Hughey, press secretary to Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, said the news that Detroiters are heavy isn't a surprise.

"But we never knew how we compared to other cities," Hughey said. "Obviously, we were a bit surprised by that."

Hughey, who himself admitted to carrying around "30 to 40 pounds of weight just from eating coney dogs," said the heavy food and car culture contributes to the city's weight problem.

"We're the auto capital of the world," Hughey said. "The psyche here is to jump in our cars and go. We promote driving. But there has to be a balance with that."

They're trying.

Kilpatrick last year hired a health director to initiate health programs within city schools and the community, Hughey said. And the mayor himself has even dieted, losing 22 pounds using first the famous Atkins low-carb diet, then by simply changing his eating habits.

The mayor will also run in a local marathon in 2004, Hughey said.

Detroiters even have their own spin on the low-carb craze.

The no-carb coney.

"Coneys with no bun," Keros said. "That's what people have been ordering. They'll get mustard and chili and cheese and the hot dog, but no bun. They're still eating quite a bit. We couldn't ask for anything better."

Neither could we.

ANDREW GUY JR.