

THE PATH TO GOOD HEALTH

Three keys to making Birmingham
a healthier place to live.

BY LOYD MCINTOSH

PHOTOS BY BETH MAYNOR-YOUNG, JONATHAN PURVIS,
AND COURTESY OF BIRMINGHAM URBAN MOUNTAIN PEDALERS



Photo of the future site of Red Mountain Park by Beth Maynor Young. Look for more of Beth's photos at her exhibit entitled "Southeastern Wetlands: Our National Treasure" at the Second Floor City Gallery at the McWane Science Center through August.

Time to face facts: Birmingham is an unhealthy city.

In almost every health-related category that matters, the city of Birmingham and the state of Alabama rank near the bottom.

Statistics don't lie. According to the United Health Foundation (www.unitedhealthfoundation.org) Alabama ranks:

- » 44th among states in total mortality
- » 50th among states with over 28 percent of the population considered obese
- » 44th among states for cardiovascular-related deaths
- » 48th among states for limited days of activity during any given 30-day period
- » 45th among states for total health

THESE STATISTICS ARE PRIMARILY A RESULT of the sedentary lifestyle many of us lead. *Men's Health Magazine* recently published a study ranking the top 100 largest metropolitan areas on their overall activity level, giving each city a letter grade. Birmingham ranked 93rd with a big, fat F for its couch potato factor. Among the most-healthy cities on the list: Portland, Oregon; Austin, Texas; Washington, D.C.; and Atlanta.

Healthy cities are communities of dedicated people, as well as progressive governments, business, and community leaders, who have made promoting healthy lifestyles a winning issue, made tough decisions in public education, and made the development of urban parks, bike lanes, greenspaces, and other active areas a priority. Birmingham could be one of those cities too. Here's how.

1 » DEVELOP THE INFRASTRUCTURE

A UNIVERSAL FEATURE in many of America's healthiest cities is the idea of walkability. Larger cities such as Portland and Austin, along with smaller cities like Chattanooga, Tennessee, have developed downtown urban centers that take the pedestrian and cyclist into account. These initiatives have not only improved the health of the overall population, but have also been key in increasing economic development in these areas.

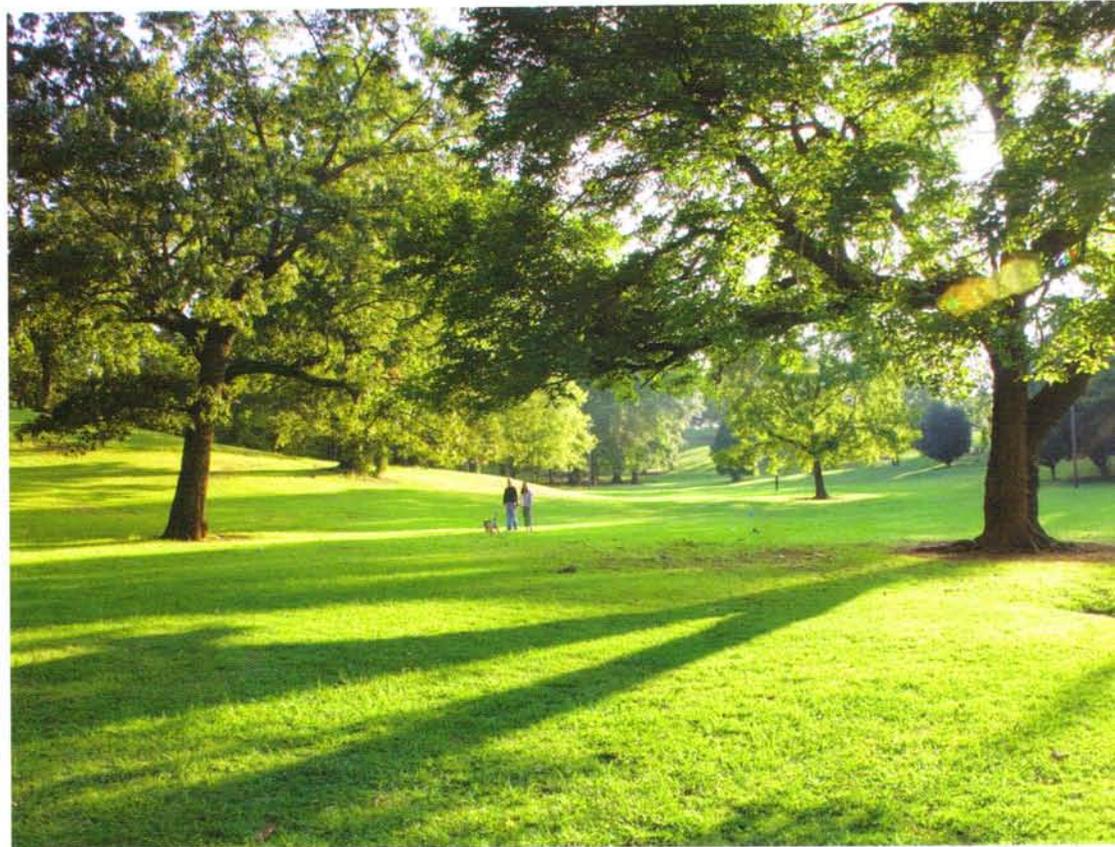
Dalton Smith, Executive Director of Region 2020, says Birmingham may soon look like a modern, health-conscious city with three urban parks currently in development: Red Mountain Park, the Railroad Reservation Park near downtown, and the expansion and upgrade of Ruffner Mountain Nature Center. Within two years, Smith says, Birmingham will have over 2,000 acres of greenspace and urban parkland in the city limits. "Our goal is to be the greenest city in America," Smith says. "It's not a very controversial thing. Everyone likes park space. If we can coordinate it and tie it all together in a logical way, most people will agree it was a great idea."

The long-range plan is to connect the three parks with a system of pedestrian-friendly sidewalks, bike paths, and updated city streets, according to Tom Maxwell, an environmental planner with the Regional Planning Commission. "One of the key factors is not just the quantity of greenspaces but the accessibility, whether it be a neighborhood pocket park or a playground for kids. It's all interrelated," Maxwell says. "In my view, greenspaces are both viable recreation and transportation networks, as well as sidewalks and bike lanes. It's not just about recreation, it's about connectivity."



ABOVE: Dalton Smith, Executive Director of Region 2020; Elizabeth Sims, also with Region 2020, and Tom Maxwell, with the Regional Planning Commission.

RIGHT: George Ward Park



2 >> DEVELOP AND SUPPORT PROGRESSIVE CIVIC LEADERS

ANOTHER KEY TO A HEALTHY CITY is visionary civic leaders. The Greater Birmingham area has several in place now who have made the development of walkable cities a priority, but perhaps none has been as aggressive as Vestavia Hills mayor Scotty McCallum. Prior to the development of an aggressive public park and sidewalk initiative, Vestavia Hills had less than a half-mile of sidewalks. However, Mayor McCallum saw the need to transform Vestavia and formed a committee to develop a plan for a network of sidewalks, with the primary goal of connecting all seven Vestavia schools. They also wanted to link many of the city's neighborhoods to the City Center and other business districts along Highway 31 and over 100 newly acquired acres of parks.

Through the leadership of Mayor McCallum, Vestavia has received several federal grants to fund as much as 80 percent of the projects that will eventually create over eight miles of sidewalks throughout the city. The city also has plans to construct a pedestrian bridge across Highway 31 and is close to receiving grants to cover the entire \$1.2-million project cost. "What we're trying to do is invite the walking concept in our neighborhoods, especially among our children," says McCallum. "We're trying to promote (children walking or riding bikes to school), but when you don't have sidewalks for children to walk on, it's rather difficult. You now see people running and jogging on the sidewalks and mothers pushing baby strollers."

3 >> SHIFT OUR THINKING

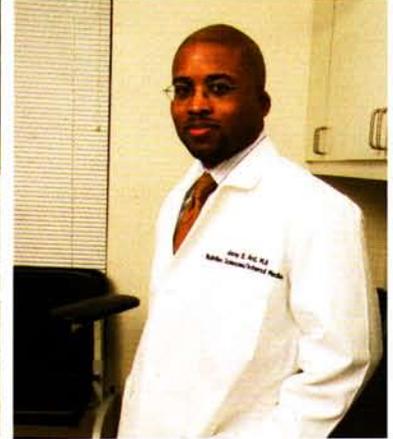
IN ORDER TO IMPROVE THE HEALTH of our city and state, we have to think differently than we have in the past. While work is being done by local governments and planning agencies to improve the region's health, businesses, health insurers, and schools need to move their thinking about health into the 21st century. Many schools have already begun replacing carbonated beverages with water, fruit juice, and sports drinks in their vending machines, and healthy snacks are finding their way into classrooms and workplaces.

However, Jamy Ard, M.D., program director of the UAB Eat Right weight management program, says he doesn't believe that convenience eating has to be unhealthy. "In a perfect world, you have fruits and vegetables available as convenient options, and I think it could happen," says Dr. Ard. "One easy solution would be to have refrigerated vending machines in the workplace that offer fresh fruits and vegetables. These things are doable."

Dr. Ard believes prevention rather than treatment of chronic conditions such as Type II diabetes, heart disease, and hypertension should be a stronger area of focus for companies and health insurers. For instance, Dr. Ard would like to see insurance companies underwrite programs that provide incentives for employees to eat appropriate amounts of fruits and vegetables or develop programs that reward workers for taking part in organized exercise programs. "I think businesses and insurers could actually get together and develop programs that make the work force healthier," Dr. Ard says. "I think this could happen tomorrow." ◉



ABOVE: Danny Haralson with The Birmingham Track Club and Patrick Ferkany with Birmingham Safe Cycling.



LEFT: A Birmingham Urban Mountain Pedaler racing at Oak Mountain State Park. ABOVE: Dr. Jamy Ard, Program Director of UAB's Eat Right Program.