

## Guest column: Economy linked to community's health

By Chip Johnson, Special to The Commercial Appeal

Tuesday, February 25, 2014

Over the past few years, Mississippians have been confronted with a variety of unappealing and troubling reports about our public health.

In 2012, Trust for America's Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation called us "the fattest state" in the nation. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention claims we have the sixth worst rates of heart disease in the country. At 74.8 years, life expectancy in Mississippi is the lowest in the nation — four years less than the national average. Statistics are not appreciably better in Tennessee or Arkansas.

Frustratingly, these reports run counter to what many of us who are proud to live and work in the Mid-South see every day. Running, cycling and other kinds of outdoor activities have never been more popular. Remarkable efforts to cultivate and sell more healthful produce are taking root in neighborhoods everywhere. Still, our public health efforts clearly have a long way to go.

Well-intentioned efforts directed by the federal government have so far failed to make much headway. Washington cannot mandate kids to play more or take part in sports. The government is limited in its ability to regulate what kind of produce gets sold and where, or how much grocers can charge.

Public health, like so many things that make our communities strong and resilient, ultimately boils down to individual choice and responsibility. Families have to take control of what kind of food they buy and serve their kids, and how long they choose to let their kids watch TV every day.

There is one crucial area, however, where the public sector can — and arguably should — play a critical role in shaping public health outcomes: better city planning.

The Urban Land Institute supports this goal as a major focus area through the Building Healthy Places initiative it launched in 2013. At the local level, mayors and other elected officials in cities and counties across the Mid-South are working together to promote health and wellness through effective stewardship of municipal resources.

A handful of ways that City Hall can drive positive change come to mind:

-- Implementing a "complete streets" policy, which means that all city streets are

designed to include lanes for bicycles and pedestrians. This creates choice and expands options available to all citizens, as well as making walking and bicycling safer and easier.

-- Ensuring all neighborhoods are within convenient distance of clean, safe parks and trails. Managing a municipal budget is largely a game of allocating scarce tax dollars where they can have the most benefit to the most people. Ensuring that litter prevention, public safety and basic maintenance continue at our public green spaces is critical. Where public or private funds are available, blighted structures can be removed to create additional “pocket parks” or community gardens.

-- Enforcing sensible building and zoning codes that allow for mixed-use development. New retail developments and successful industrial recruitment are great for our towns — but if these businesses are located far from where people already live, go to school or attend church, then they merely create more reasons for people to sit in their cars or pay for costly new bus lines to service them. Reducing the miles people have to travel to live, work and have fun keeps more money in everyone’s pockets — creating additional economic impact. More health equates to more wealth.

To be clear, there is no “one size fits all” solution for what will make a town healthier. The planning policies I’ve recommended here are inside-out, bottom-up strategies, driven by local leadership, not federal bureaucracy.

The benefits of better planning accrue locally as well. In addition to increased purchasing power for citizens, healthier populations enjoy shorter hospital visits and fewer sick days. This translates to more productivity and lower insurance costs for employers.

Designing our buildings and streets in a way that holds their value over generations keeps property values strong, mitigating the need for business-killing property tax increases in the future.

Simply put, keeping our citizens healthy is an essential part of keeping our local economies strong. It begins with better, smarter land use and planning decisions at City Hall — which means it really comes from the insistence of taxpayers and voters in neighborhoods and towns across Mississippi and the South.

*Chip Johnson is mayor of Hernando, Miss. For more information on the Urban Land Institute’s Building Healthy Places initiative, visit [ULL.org](http://ULL.org).*

