

Health and Wellness - The New Economic Development Advantage

By Mark Stapp, executive director, Master of Real Estate Development, W. P. Carey School of Business, Arizona State University, May 17, 2012.

Communities have many types of capital - financial, physical, economic and political among them. One not often considered and none is more important than community health capital. How healthy are its citizens, what type of wellness support systems does it have? Healthy places with great support systems are a desirable place to live, a great place to own a business and have a more desirable, productive and efficient workforce that is cheaper to employ.

A healthy community is a place where mental and physical well-being is supported through connected social systems and is the foundation for achieving all other goals of the community. Good health is often seen as an individual thing - personal choice, no one else's business - and seen as expense to business. These two perspectives are completely counter to the idea of creating healthy community. Health at the community level in this country is taken for granted but is essential for a productive society. You can't build a highly productive and innovative work force if it's not healthy. A desirable place to live and work means it will be sought after. A sought after place will have higher property values, more local community disposable income, more economic opportunity and prosperity. That is an economic advantage that community leaders, business owners and real estate developers should care deeply about.

Why has health become such a politically divisive subject? Because it's about money not health! The discussion should not be about health insurance nor should it be about "sustainability". It should deal with keeping people healthy, not who pays when they are already broken. Health is the basic foundation of quality of life but it's dealt with as an insurance issue in this country - who has access, who pays, who's included and who's not. We like to talk about creating sustainable communities as the way to create better places to live. Unfortunately most of the sustainability discussion is about recycling, walkability, transit oriented development, energy efficiency, using building products with low VOC emissions.

This isn't at all what makes a sustainable community. It has to do with the health of the community. The national debate about health is played out every day and what we hear is there is no such thing as free medical care. The cost of health care is high and likely to go up. We will likely have to pay more in tax to cover increasing health care costs. Employers will have to pay more in health benefits. Federal provided services will likely be cut which means more will need free health care because they have to get it some place but remember - there is no such thing as free medical care. This is not a virtuous cycle, it is a downward spiral. This is not an insurance issue nor is it a national issue; it's a local community issue.

A better quality of life is not about a longer life span, it is about a longer health span. We know that many factors contribute to a long life (demographics, socioeconomics, genetics, the

environment, culture) but nothing is more important than positive health practices and most are within our control and influenced by our relationships. I saw this statistic in Spirit Magazine (yes, as in Southwest Airlines in-flight magazine) from a study conducted by the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington - residents of New York City will live approximately 1,040 days longer than the national average. Why? According to the Dr. Ali Mokdad it is because the City has focused on healthy food, physical education in schools, smoking bans and trans-fat bans in food, making it safe and easy to walk. He went on to say "you can live longer if you change your behavior".

According to the Center for Disease Control, chronic diseases are the most common and costly of all health problems, but they are also the most preventable. Four common, health-damaging, but modifiable behaviors—tobacco use, insufficient physical activity, poor eating habits, and excessive alcohol use—are responsible for much of the illness, disability, and premature death related to chronic diseases. Changing behavior only slightly can have a significant impact. Psychologists will tell you that changing behavior depends on social relationships – peer pressure, what our friends do, what our colleagues do. This is a social problem and that is where communities and social systems within communities can have the biggest impact. It's also where business can help itself by offering programs that help employees live healthier lives. This is how we create and economic advantage. This is a virtuous cycle and one that makes the community a better place to live!

For more information, call (480) 965-8517, e-mail Mark.Stapp@asu.edu, or visit <http://wpcarey.asu.edu/master-real-estate>.