

# APPLICATION



City Name Town of Walnut

Population  Under 10,000  Over 10,000

Category  Public Safety  Planning & Economic Development

City Spirit  Public Works

Title of Entry Find Your Healthy Place

Description of Project Turning the old Dollar General into a place where people can come and exercise. The WELL is up and running for the health of our community.

Project Summary (use additional pages if necessary)

Signature of Chief Elected or Appointed Official Vicki J. Skinner

Please provide the following information in case of questions about the application.

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2018

TOWN OF WALNUT: CITY SPIRIT

*WELCOME TO THE WELL*



*Find Your Healthy Place*

TOWN OF WALNUT WELLNESS INITIATIVE, EST. 2013

Mayor Vicki Skinner

Town of Walnut

4/18/2018

**Town of Walnut**  
**2018 City Spirit Application**  
**Mississippi Municipal Excellence Awards**

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## **Why a Wellness Initiative in Walnut, MS?**

Mississippi scores at the bottom of the scale in health rankings. The state is usually among the first to receive a new color on “the chart” as obesity rates across the country continue to rise. That is unacceptable. National and State leaders are unsuccessful in turning this problem around. It MUST be a local effort. The Board of Aldermen chartered a committee in 2013 to lead a wellness initiative. The committee’s vision was (and still is) *to improve the health and wellness of Walnut and the surrounding communities by providing exemplary leadership, promoting healthy behavior and engaging all stakeholders*. We knew how to accomplish the first two items of the mission, but the “engaging all stakeholders” piece was a wildcard. We questioned whether the challenge would be successful because our community’s health had been declining for decades. We tried to launch the effort back in 2009. It failed. By 2013, the health scores were not improving. Many people suffered with chronic diseases and did not work. 38% pursued no physical activity. 37% had sedentary lifestyles. 27% were in poor health. 25% were smokers. They missed 5.1 days because of poor physical health each year. Just 46% of the residents in Tippah County had access to exercise opportunities. (*Note: Ripley’s facility is a 30-minute drive on a busy 2-lane highway.*) Tippah County had the worst stroke rate of all 82 counties. We were at the bottom of the list in a state that was at the bottom of the list. Mississippi average rankings across virtually all measures were better. National average rankings were MUCH better. The importance of improving the quality of life in the Walnut community was paramount. Although Walnut’s population is around 750, we are “the town” for about 10,000 residents living within a five-mile radius. Something had to change.

## **Methods Used to Achieve Goals**

The answer to that question about engaging all stakeholders came when we began presenting facts and encouragement to the community. After many months of promoting healthy lifestyles and sharing the health statistics through social media, website and group presentations, we began to understand the messaging that resonated with the community. After each event, we reviewed the process and measured the response. We made corrections and tweaks to the message, being

sure to explain the source of the data, the benefits of improving overall wellness and the long-term impact that health rankings have on our quality of life. The community's perception of our mission was trending positively across all demographics and expanding throughout the neighborhood. Organizations including small businesses, industries, churches and schools began to take notice. People wanted to be involved. We became a team. Every stakeholder began to work together toward a common goal. That is why we believe our wellness initiative exemplifies City Spirit.

The first method involved registering the residents to "Lose a Ton". Each month, participants would voluntarily check in and report the amount of weight lost during the previous month and their total weight loss. Before we reached the end of the timeline goal, residents had lost more than 2,300 pounds! We bragged. We engaged residents by offering a community health advocate workshop, to help people learn how to manage chronic diseases for themselves or as caregivers. We held multiple no smoking/no tobacco campaigns across the community and encouraged people to quit using tobacco. During the summer league games, we set up information tables with tips to knock tobacco out of the park and provided access to a support system (online, telephone, newsletter) to help those who wanted to quit. We began publishing a monthly church bulletin insert for the health and wellness initiative based on Romans 12:1. Circulation of the inserts grew to about 1,300 copies. (We estimate more than 4,000 people per month are reading it.) We reorganized the annual fall festival to focus on health and wellness. We scheduled cooking competitions for healthy food choices. The committee operated the main tent in the middle of the festival and administered flu shots, handed out sunscreen and gave physical exams that indicated BP, pulse rate and BG levels. Finally, we launched a community-wide survey to identify

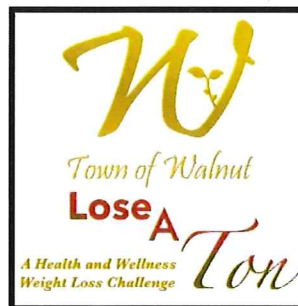
**WALNUT HEALTH & WELLNESS INITIATIVE**

~Mission~

**Romans 12:1**

*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.*

October 2013



Register for the Walnut community Lose A Ton campaign. (2,000 pounds by May 2014!) Request more information by email: [healthywalnut@comcast.net](mailto:healthywalnut@comcast.net)



Walnut Cub Scouts will be collecting surplus "Trick or Treat" candy to send to our troops overseas! Drop your candy by Kidz Town on Saturday, November 2nd from 10a until noon. Thanks!

strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats pertaining to Walnut's focus on health and wellness.

No single method of engagement was sufficient. All of them together were extraordinary. The message coming from the community was clear. 61.22% of those surveyed said we needed a wellness facility. It seemed to address most of the health factors and it filled a gap in our community. What a dream! The dream became a reality. In 2016, the Town of Walnut purchased a vacant building located on Highway 72. Architectural and engineering firms designed plans to bring the facility up to code. The Town purchased flooring and fitness equipment. We awarded the contract in April 2017 and construction began soon thereafter.

### **Impact on the Community**

Social media and website posts pertaining to the wellness initiative consistently reached more than 2,000 people. Those individuals told other people. Before long, we had developed a network that included local schools, Boy Scouts, workplaces, and health care providers. Some members of our wellness committee formed a club, Walnut Runs, to provide information and encouragement that helps people transition from a sedentary lifestyle toward active fitness. The movement began with weekly walks/runs at the walking track until interest in walking and running became self-sustaining. Today, the group provides recurring annual sponsorships for three established 5K's held in Town. They also host a couple of fun runs each year to encourage and influence children to develop healthy habits.



Each segment of the community provided unique opportunity to expand our message. The timely sharing of useful information became our prime promotion and marketing tool. People began talking publicly about chronic diseases, injury prevention, behavioral health, oral health, tobacco use, substance abuse, nutrition and physical activity. The community became our first partner, ready and willing to learn about and embrace healthy lifestyles. After decades of declining health, they began to demand opportunity for change and improvement. That was our magic moment.

## **Building Partnerships**

It is difficult for any municipality of any size to launch a wellness initiative. Conversely, the possibilities are endless when you engage all the stakeholders. Our stakeholders are residents of the community, governing agencies, and privately held organizations. Because our reputation with the wellness initiative was strong and positive, organizations from across the state were supportive. They were already aware of the benefits both to their workforce and to their bottom line. We believed in our mission. And they believed in us. We are honored to receive active engagement and support from Delta Health Collaborative, Smokefree MS, BCBS of MS Foundation, Aluma-Form, Peoples Bank, Walmart, and a host of gifts from small business owners and anonymous donors. Our partners are amazing.

## **Benefits of the Wellness Initiative: If You Build It...**

The mayor and board had a good relationship and most of the projects we worked on since 2009 were exciting. But not in a good way. Problems ranged from construction woes on a long-term sewer project to a water main break under the 4-lane that cut off water to half the town (during the shortest and coldest days of winter). We worked well together. The wellness initiative was exciting in a good way. The first benefit was that the board chartered a commission in 2013 and formally launched the Walnut Wellness Initiative. The committee was the second benefit. The team we assembled are world-class professionals in every way. Committed and caring, they set out to change the public perception of health and wellness. The third benefit was the education and development of our community, with the emphasis on unity. After all the study, communication, and data gathering, The Well was one of several obvious solutions. Would the people support it? Absolutely.



## The Drive for Funding

State and federal funding sources consider health and wellness to be a social service. That's why there is little funding available from the government. And that's why State and Federal governments are unreliable agents to improve the health and wellness of its citizens. It must be local. Walnut, like all other municipalities, has to make difficult budget decisions. We are good stewards of infrastructure as it pertains to the public's needs and wants. We want to improve the quality of life for our residents. The wellbeing of a community benefits business and industry partners, particularly in improving both long- and short-term health care costs and in reducing missed workdays due to poor health. The collaboration



mentioned in the Building Partnerships section was much more than teamwork. Our generous private partners committed more than \$500,000 for the wellness center! The largest contributors (so far) are Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Mississippi Foundation (\$220,000), Peoples Bank (\$50,000)

and Aluma-Form (\$10,000). One of the first funding agreements we secured was from Waste Connections. As the operator of the regional landfill in Walnut, they were looking for an opportunity to do something to improve community relations. A plan involving the Town of Walnut, Air Liquide and Waste Connections involves capturing gases from the landfill, scrubbing it, and piping it into the natural gas main pipeline. The community looks forward to reduced landfill emissions, green energy, and a \$250,000 contribution from Waste Connections to sustain the wellness center over the next five years beginning in 2019.



The partnering organizations contributed \$920,000 thus far toward health and wellness. The overall initiative includes new construction of The Well, sidewalks, outdoor fitness zones and renovations to the walking track, tennis courts and swimming pool. The current wellness initiative is a \$1.4 million project.

## **Cultural Impact**

One of Walnut's greatest characteristics is the level of care and concern for our neighbors. We give more. We serve more. We come together whenever a need arises. The health and wellness initiative has touched virtually every person in the community. Families are beginning to understand the importance of physical activity and healthy food choices. The focus on health and wellness balances prevention and proper management of chronic diseases. The initiative provided an opportunity to come together. This time, it's not over a natural disaster. This time, it's not over a loved one that's facing a terminal illness. This time, it's fun. The following groups, formal and informal are engaged: the mayor and board of aldermen, the wellness committee (and their families), Walnut school teachers, students, and district board, scouts, the football team, churches, civic groups, business community, and virtually all of our residents. Our goal was not necessarily to change people's attitudes, but to bring to light a very dangerous pathway that we have been travelling for decades. Our attitudes toward health and wellness are powerful forces for results. Those results can be good or bad, depending on one's attitude. Our culture was one of processed meals robbed of nutrition but laden with additives and preservatives. We had grown accustomed to automation, not realizing that inactivity nudged out physical and mental exercise.

On December 4, 2017, the initiative achieved another milestone. We officially opened the wellness center. People came by the dozens to tour the facility and register for membership. We expected this trend to continue for a couple of weeks. We hoped for at least 100 memberships within the first couple of months. As of this writing, there are 270 memberships at our facility and The Well has received more than 5,000 visits since it opened. (Do you recall our population?) The facility is open to members at all hours and is equipped with treads, bikes, recumbents, and a large selection of strength training equipment. It has made a huge impact on

our community. We now have access to exercise facilities. People are starting to make healthy choices for themselves and their families. But we aren't done.

There are two rooms at The WELL that will provide more opportunity for health and wellness. One will be an activity room for kids. Ceiling projection systems equipped with motion sensors will display video games on the floor. Kids can play soccer, "whack a mole" or play piano by interacting with the three overhead systems. The room will be equipped with cameras so that parents will be able to monitor their kids' activities on CCTV while exercising. In our most recent community survey, 38% requested support in developing healthy lifestyles and making good food choices. Therefore, the other room will become a fully equipped teaching kitchen where classes will help people learn to prepare and cook healthy meals for their families. The Walnut community continues to request additional classes. We could possibly outgrow the 10,000 square foot facility!

The Town of Walnut is also in the process of administering a Safe Routes to School grant funded by the Transportation Alternatives Program and awarded in 2015. We are building sidewalks on the three blocks west of Highway 15. The project will

# COMING SOON TO THE WELL




Figure 1: Interactive Floor System at Memorial Mirra Club (Boston, MA) (courtesy of Walnut Well Kids)




Figure 1: SEMCC Teaching Kitchen (benchmark for Walnut Well Kitchen)

## Activity Space for Kids

- Flooring
- TV's
- Interactive Digital Floor System
- Closed Circuit TV Monitoring System
- Safety Mirrors
- Double Convection Oven
- Commercial Sink
- 5-Burner Gas Cooktop
- Refrigerator
- Dishwasher
- Cabinetry
- Cookware
- Small Appliances
- Dishes, Utensils, Accessories
- Stainless Mobile Racks
- HDTV Overhead Camera System
- Microwave
- Sanitary Wipe Dispenser Stations
- Commercial Island Vent Hood
- Stainless Mobile Food Prep Stations
- Stools
- Icemaker



## TEACHING KITCHEN

TOWN OF WALNUT WELLNESS INITIATIVE, EST. 2017

connect The Well, school, ballfields and walking track while providing pedestrians with safe places to walk and cross the streets.

Crossroads Rehabilitation has leased a section of the wellness center building. The on-site location allows patients recovering with physical therapy to rehab and exercise in the same building. Many times, patients will register for membership at The Well after completing their rehab.

### **Impact on Future Generations**

Welcome to the future. The impact was immediate. Health rankings for Tippah county already show improvement in obesity (34% v 35%), physical inactivity (36% v 37%), missed work days due to sickness (4.3 v 5.1), and a significant improvement in the rate of smoking (20% v 25%). Related chronic diseases (stroke, cancer, Type 2 diabetes, etc.) will improve because of the shift in attitude toward active lifestyles and healthy eating. A healthier community may soon become the deciding factor for the competitive nature of industry recruitment. Walnut's unique ability to fulfill industry needs will result in a better quality of life for our community. The health ranking scores for the state will improve because of our team's efforts. We would like to see more municipalities launch health and wellness initiatives so that, together, we can remove Mississippi permanently from the bottom of the list. Times are changing for the better.



Walnut's Mayor and Board, the Wellness Initiative Committee, and all of our many volunteers comprise the nature of city spirit. We will continue to support our mission. We are happy to provide encouragement and guidance to other communities that want to improve their quality of life. The Well is an example of what is possible when a municipality engages the community. We found our healthy place.