
To prod residents to hoof it, towns map out walking routes

By Taryn Plumb

Globe Correspondent / August 9, 2012

Maybe you've figured you don't have the time. Or you haven't known where to go. Or it's just been easier to jump in the car and head out.

Well, if you live in Milford or Franklin, you no longer have an excuse not to get out and walk.

Through a collaboration between the two towns, the nonprofit WalkBoston organization, and the Hockomock Area YMCA, each community now has its own downtown walking map outlined with numerous routes, time markers, and various points of interest.

Milford's map was released earlier this year, while Franklin's is set to come out this month.

The goal of the maps — which were developed through grant money from the MetroWest Health Foundation — is to illustrate the options for recreational walks around each town, as well as to present functional routes that could be substituted for car trips when it comes to running errands, bringing the kids to school, or going to a doctor's appointment.

"It's really looking at how we can change behavior," said Lauren Marciszyn, director of youth and community wellness at the Hockomock Area YMCA, which became involved through its ongoing Healthy Futures initiative, aimed at tackling childhood obesity. "It's improving the health of the community by making the healthy choice the easy choice."

Milford's map, which is available on the town website and at several municipal offices and businesses, features 10 loops with a half-dozen highlighted points of interest, including Louisa Lake, the 1884 Memorial Hall, and the Irish Round Tower, a 74-foot memorial in St. Mary's Cemetery. Different routes pass by the high school and the Milford Regional Medical Center, and incorporate the Upper Charles River Trail.

There's also a "Little Engine that Could" walk — inspired by the classic book written by Milford native Mabel C. Bragg — traversing downtown historic sites, marked by a dozen sidewalk stamps in the shape of the iconic, self-esteem-filled engine.

Franklin's map, meanwhile, will feature 20 to 25 interconnected routes weaving through two downtown historic districts, and past the town's commuter rail station, the Franklin Public Library, Dean College, the Franklin Historical Museum, the DelCarte Conservation Area, and various other fields, parks, and baseball fields, according to town planner Beth Dahlstrom.

The map, once printed, will be available at town buildings and local businesses, and online, she said.

Routes on both maps range from a half-mile to 2 to 3 miles, and are broken into increments that can be completed in five minutes, according to Joe Cutrufo, program coordinator for WalkBoston. A similar map is also in the works in Northborough, and WalkBoston has created about two dozen similar maps in and around the Hub, Cutrufo said.

Milford and Franklin, particularly, "have walkable, dense, compact, very developed cores," he said.

Marciszyn agreed that both communities have an advantage in their ample amount of sidewalks. "We want to make sure that wherever we're telling people to walk, safety is a priority," she said. "We're trying to combine both physical health and functionality."

But, as Cutrufo noted, because cars are often a necessity of living in the suburbs, “so much of this is about walking for health.”

Still, he added, the goal is to encourage people to at least replace some of their driving with trips on foot.

“Really the idea is to just get families walking,” said Ellen Freedman, who is involved with the initiative, and serves as project coordinator for the Greater Milford Health Access Coalition. “It generally promotes walking in the community.”

And as well as teaching about landmarks and distinctive historical points, the maps can also help to illustrate that some walking trips aren’t as long or as ominous as people might think.

“I hope that people will find new routes for walking that they didn’t know existed,” Dahlstrom said.

Ultimately, though, the maps aren’t the only thing the two communities are promoting to get people on their feet.

Franklin, for instance, is in the midst of a \$7.25 million overhaul of its downtown; the work includes roadway, streetscape, landscape, sidewalk, crosswalk and other pedestrian-aimed improvements, according to Dahlstrom.

Milford took part in the National Walk at Lunch Day on April 25, according to Freedman. The town is also challenging kids this summer through the Rethink Your Drink program, which asks them to pledge to have no more than two sugar-sweetened beverages a week (with prizes as an incentive).

Both towns, meanwhile, are participating in Mass in Motion, a program by the state’s Executive Office of Health and Human Services that helps cities and towns initiate efforts to get residents to eat healthier and be more active.

“Ultimately,” said Marciszyn, “it’s about how we can get the community to look at where they live as a place to be active, and to utilize walking as a mode of transportation.”

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