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Merced recognized for its efforts to reduce childhood obesity

BY ANA B. IBARRA

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The city of Merced has recently been recognized for its increasing involvement in the Let's Move campaign.

The Let's Move initiative is a nationwide effort to reduce childhood obesity. The campaign calls upon local officials to adopt policies that improve communities' access to healthy affordable food and opportunities for physical activity.

The National League of Cities, an organization that works in partnership with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, awarded the city five medals for its efforts in providing healthier food options in schools' breakfast and lunch programs, and for revitalizing existing parks to encourage physical activity.

Eleven elected officials across California have joined the Let's Move initiative, including Merced Mayor Stan Thurston and Merced County Supervisor Hub Walsh.

Thurston said he decided to join the movement because he recognizes that childhood obesity has become an epidemic in Merced.

"I am more than happy to be a spokesperson for (Let's Move in Merced)," Thurston said. "The plan is to create a more conscious community."

Thurston said one of his goals is to increase the use of bicycle lanes, and encourage more people to engage in the simplest form of exercise – walking.

Thurston hopes his actions will encourage other city officials to join him in the movement for a healthier Merced.

"I hope it's in the forefront of people's minds that we're doing what we can to help reduce obesity, especially in children," he said.

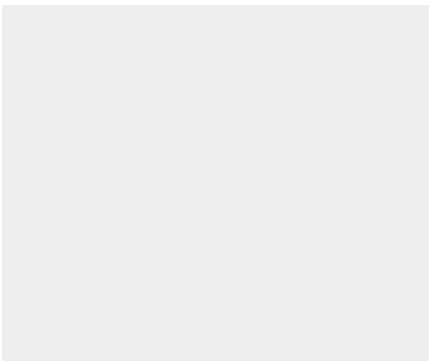
According to the Merced County Public Health Department, 40.9 percent of the children in the city are overweight, and three out of four adults in the county are obese.

"All of us need to be involved in addressing this problem," said Kathleen Grassi, director of the Merced County Public Health Department. "And it's important that we are joined by decision-making officials who do what they can to create a healthy environment."

"If we don't have the support of policymakers, then sometimes we can't get very far," she added.

Grassi also said she has noticed a movement across the country in which appointed and elected officials are starting to embrace the idea of healthier communities. She hopes in the long run this can create some significant changes.

The NLC reports that direct costs of obesity and obesity-related diseases are \$50 million per 100,000 residents. If cities, such as Merced, were to reduce their obesity rates to the national average of 34.9 percent, the combined savings of those communities would total \$500 million in



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