

FCS SPOTLIGHT

Northeast Region

by Joy Sims

“We plant trees so our grandchildren may enjoy their shade.” I was introduced to this quote at my first national conference as an Extension agent. It’s a sentiment I’ve carried with me at times when I couldn’t see the course of a project as well as times when everything fell perfectly into place. Making long-term sustainable changes for health is a difficult seed to sow because so many pieces have to fall in line in order to make it happen, but with the right conditions and support you can see the seed sprouting.

Finding the right time and place to plant a seed is pivotal. Madison Parish is considered one of six “high obesity” parishes by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), so one of the goals of the Healthy Communities grant is to improve access to everyday destinations by building safe places to walk and bike for transport or exercise in the parish. In 2020, the LSU AgCenter Healthy Communities team worked on a grant with the City of Tallulah to create crosswalks along Highway 65, so when we approached city leaders about the Recreational Trails grant in 2021, we all knew it would be a great opportunity to make some very necessary changes along the most pedestrian heavy route in the city. The next step was figuring out how to get started.

Of course, when you plant a tree, you want to make sure the conditions are right for vitality. So, Healthy Communities and Smart Growth America hosted a four-day summit to help the community learn how we can make equitable changes with a heavy focus on developing a pocket park in Tallulah. A key function of Healthy Communities is to gather community input and support for all interventions. In response to the coalition’s desire to host a health fair and the need to gather community input about the walking paths and pocket park, we hosted “Madison on the Crawl,” an event where residents walked a short loop in Tallulah, stopping at booths along the route to meet organizations that serve the parish, give input on how to make active transportation safer and easier in Tallulah, and vote on amenities they want to see at the future pocket park. We used the data collected during the event along with the 2017 Complete Streets recommendations developed by the Center for Planning Excellence (CPEX) to submit our application for the Recreational Trails grant in July 2021. This intervention will support all residents in the City of Tallulah, especially the senior population.

The hardest part of planting a seed is waiting for it to grow. After submitting the application, we all waited with bated breath for months to find out if we had been approved. In April 2022, the City of Tallulah was officially awarded the Recreational Trails Grant for \$100,000. Healthy Communities will support the city by providing materials like benches, lighting, accessibility ramps, and signs with funding from the CDC High Obesity Program (HOP). The coalition will continue to partner with

the City of Tallulah throughout the completion of the grant and the goal is to have sidewalk improvements and supporting materials installed by Fall 2023. As a testament to the partnership between Tallulah residents, city leaders, the Madison Healthy Communities Coalition, CPEX, and many others, the “trees” we’ve just planted will bloom in time for us to enjoy their shade along with our children and grandchildren.



MAY 2022