

Newport Health Equity Zone to launch

By Janine Weisman | Mercury | Twitter: @j9weisman | Posted: Tuesday, September 15, 2015 4:30 pm

The quickest way to get from Girard Avenue in Newport's northern end to downtown would be to cut across the Newport Grand parking lot. That vast tract of asphalt can be a pretty miserable part of a commute to work without a car on a day during a heat wave. And even when the weather is fine, heavy traffic makes crossing Admiral Kalbfus Road or the Connell Highway rotary dangerous.

A new collaboration of community groups will be taking a closer look at such pedestrian perils among other physical and social features that may impact the health of the people living in two Newport neighborhoods.

The Newport Health Equity Zone Project (Newport-HEZ) seeks to examine factors that influence the rates of diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and depression as well as assess barriers to accessing health care, exercise opportunities, and healthy eating and behaviors for residents of Newport's North End and Broadway corridor. The goal is to identify health disparities and find ways to address them while also empowering residents, said Jessica Walsh, director of prevention at the Women's Resource Center in Newport.

Preliminary discussions have already raised questions about limitations on the use of outdoor basketball courts, which a city ordinance prohibits after sunset. Two basketball courts at the Park Holm public housing site in the North End, which had been vandalism targets, were eliminated when the site was redeveloped over the past few years.

"We aren't going to make these decisions for the community. Our job is to ask questions," Walsh said.

The Women's Resource Center is one of 11 organizations in the state to receive a Health Equity Zone grant from the Rhode Island Department of Health as part of a place-based emphasis on developing new health policy. Research suggests where you live makes a difference in your overall health and



150916mrc fall feature standalone (copy)

The Cranston Calvert School playground is located in census tract 406, which covers the areas surrounding Broadway. The playground is open from 3 p.m. to sunset on school days and 8 a.m. to sunset all other days, per city ordinance.

health-related behaviors, with close links observed between medical geography and sociology and the rates of disease and injuries. The Women's Resource Center is receiving \$235,000 for the first year of the project. Funding could be awarded for three additional years, Walsh said.

The Newport-HEZ project will have six working groups, each focused on a primary area impacting health: transportation, arts and culture, open space, physical and emotional health, education innovation and economic opportunities and food access. Each working group has an assigned lead organization working with support agencies and a minimum of two residents from the North End and Broadway neighborhoods. Lead organizations are Bike Newport, Boys and Girls Clubs of Newport County, Arts & Culture Alliance of Newport County, Fab Newport, Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Center and the Aquidneck Land Trust. Lending expertise and support are Worldways Social Marketing, the RI Coalition Against Domestic Violence, the Alliance for a Livable Newport, and newportFILM.

The official launch of the Newport-HEZ project will take place on Wednesday, Sept. 23, from 6-7 p.m. at the Florence Gray Center, 1 York St., Newport, with a brief presentation and an opportunity for the public to ask questions and express an interest in becoming members of a working group. The project is also looking for residents of the Broadway and North End neighborhoods interested in serving as consultants.

The two neighborhoods are defined by census tracts with the North End (tract 405) having the larger population and lower median household income, according to the Census Bureau's 2013 American Community Survey. The survey also shows that one in five residents of the Broadway area (tract 406) is foreign-born. Broadway also has slightly more residents with college degrees than the county overall.

Census tracts come in odd shapes, making it difficult to describe the boundaries of neighborhoods. 405 encompasses the area roughly from JT O'Connell Road and Coddington Highway southward, including Newport Heights, Park Holm and Miantonomi Park. It cuts across Dexter Street and Admiral Kalbfus Road to Malbone Road to Warner Street and Farewell Street, roughly following the train tracks northward and curving up toward Peary Street.

Tract 406 looks sort of like a bow tie, encompassing Dudley Avenue to Sagamore Street on the north end, zig zagging its way across Admiral Kalbfus Road through neighborhoods to Malbone Road to Warner Street to Thames Street and then back by West Marlborough Street. It follows to Broadway, along the lower half of Ayrault Street to Kay Street to Gibbs Avenue turning onto Bliss Road to Freeborn Street and cutting across Broadway to Dudley.

The 2013 census data indicates North End residents have a shorter commute to work — 17 minutes — while commute time is 21 minutes for Broadway residents, compared to the 22 minute commute for Newport County residents overall.