Walking the Walk
Active community design should be part of health agenda, champion walker says
BY TRISTAN SCOTT // JUL 28, 2014 // NEWS & FEATURES

City planning and public health might seem like an unlikely pairing, but Mark Fenton has devoted his career to convincing civic leaders and the general public that the two are constituent elements of a healthy community, and key to the livelihood of future generations.

Or at least, that’s how he’s spent most of his career.

For years, Fenton also competed as a champion walker, and from 1986 to 1990 was a member of the United States national racewalking team five times, representing the U.S. in international competitions. While training for the 1984 and 1988 Olympic Trials in the 50-kilometer racewalk, he studied
biomechanics and exercise physiology at the Olympic Training Center's Sports Science Laboratory in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

And while Fenton is still a walking enthusiast, he’s more interested in how city planning and well-planned community infrastructure encourages transit by foot or bicycle and fosters a healthier community.

The building blocks of public health begin with the community, which must embrace the philosophy that the design of a city or town can promote healthful activity – just as communities that have made it less convenient to smoke cigarettes have helped curb tobacco use.

But Fenton, who is whip thin, wears an impenetrable Fu Manchu mustache and talks as fast as he walks, begins his pitch with more alarming data – if the current generation doesn’t start moving more and eating less, it could become the first to live shorter lives than its parents.

For Fenton, the path toward curbing this grim trend is hewed out by framing community design as a public health agenda, and by building communities that support a healthier, more physically active population, as well as more sustainable and enjoyable lifestyles.

A public health, planning, and transportation consultant, Fenton is trying to help America find its way to crafting more active and more livable cities, towns, and neighborhoods. He works with organizations and communities around the country to build environments, policies, and programs that help to create places where more people walk, bicycle, and take transit more of the time.

And it’s not just about healthier people.
Done well, he said, active community designs lead to economically, environmentally, and socially thriving cities, towns, and rural settings where people of all ages, abilities, and incomes lead long, vibrant lives.

He came to Whitefish at the behest of North Valley Hospital, the city of Whitefish and the Flathead City-County Health Department, which sponsored a Healthy Communities Workshop July 22.

Fenton, a vocal pedestrian advocate and recognized authority on public health issues and the need for community, environmental, and public-policy initiatives to encourage more walking and bicycling, was the event’s keynote speaker.

He also led attendees on a “walking audit” of Whitefish – a deconstruction of the city center to determine its walkability, and whether pedestrian and bike paths, crosswalks, street signs, park benches, shaded sidewalks, public transit, and bike racks are woven into the fabric of the community to create a network promoting non-motorized transportation.

“I’m sorry that I walk fast, but it’s good,” he said at the outset of the walking audit. “We’ll burn off our lunches.”

Fenton asked participants to gauge each section of the walk on a scale of 0-10 – the lower the score, the less walkable the route – and explain their reasoning behind the score.

“Until you start thinking about this, you really don’t notice it,” Whitefish City Planner Dave Taylor said. “We want not only the city leaders but the public to be engaged in how we design our downtown.”

Community design as a health agenda is a fairly new concept, and Fenton acknowledges that it requires a paradigm shift among voters and city officials alike.

But in the end, it’s worth it.
As children lead increasingly sedentary lives, obesity and diabetes are coming to define America’s “looming chronic disease apocalypse,” Fenton said.

One of three children born today will be diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes, which used to be called “adult-onset” diabetes because medical experts didn’t believe it was physiologically possible for children to contract it.

“We have just taken physical activity out of our daily lives,” Fenton said, adding that three behaviors – tobacco use, poor nutrition and physical inactivity are causing the uptick in disease.

Fenton is quick to note that exercise does not have to be structured, and can include walking the dog, biking to the market, strolling to school, or bike-commuting to work. However, to accommodate those utilitarian activities, a community must feature the adequate public designs.

He calls it the “healthy trip decision hierarchy,” noting that nearly 25 percent of all trips from home are one mile or less, and roughly 40 percent are two miles or less.

He’s an advocate of reshaping healthy communities to raise the current generation as “free-range kids,” which can only happen if communities embrace the notion.

“I’m a raving lunatic about this because we are raising a generation of kids, and they are the first generation of children that are going to have shorter life spans than their parents because we have built a world that can’t have free range kids,” Fenton said. “We need to ask ourselves, are we building a world that is worthy of these kids?”