

TSET Better Health Podcast Transcript

Episode 52: Walking and Pedaling to Better Health

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Summary: Walking, bicycling and other forms of person-powered active transportation are great for recreation, getting from point A to point B and improving one's health and wellness. Episode 52 explores state- and community-based efforts to keep Oklahomans moving in fun and safe environments. Guests are ODOT Active Transportation Coordinator Bart Vleugels and TSET Healthy Living Program coordinators Shelby Keller of Payne County and Stephanie Pendergraft and Kate Ladwig of Garfield County, who discuss Walk This May events in Stillwater and Enid.

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[Theme music]

James Tyree: Hello everyone! Welcome to Episode 52 of the TSET Better Health Podcast. I am your host, James Tyree, associate director of Integrated Communications at TSET ...

Sarah Carson: And I am Sarah Carson, campaign manager for TSET. The constitutional mission of TSET is to reduce cancer and cardiovascular disease rates in our state by helping Oklahomans eat healthier, engage in more physical activity and quit or never start tobacco use. It's serious business and yet, taking those first steps toward improving our health and feeling better could be literally a walk in the park. Or a couple of time around the block.

Later in this episode, I will tell you all the ways a simple, brisk walk on a regular basis can improve our physical and mental health, according to the Mayo Clinic.

J. Tyree: Can't wait to hear it, Sarah. We already know, at least in a general sense, that taking those first steps toward moving more and building on them can reap healthy dividends for our wellness. Thankfully, there are local and statewide programs, projects and events throughout Oklahoma that encourage walking and bicycling by making it more fun, social and safe. In fact, that's the theme of this episode: "Walking and Pedaling to Better Health."

S. Carson: Walking and bicycling are the two most common forms of active transportation. Today we will hear from TSET Healthy Living Program coordinators in Enid and Stillwater, who discuss their collaborations with local groups and individuals to organize Walk This May and similar events, along with projects that encourage safe active transportation year-round. They will follow our first guest, who is the active transportation point person for the Oklahoma Department of Transportation, or ODOT.

James recently had a conversation with him about how ODOT incorporates the needs and safety of pedestrians and bicyclists with into their road plans and projects. Let's meet him and hear more about his statewide work for walkers and cyclists.

- B. Vleugels: Thank you for having me. My name is Bart Vleugels, And my title is Active Transportation Coordinator for the Oklahoma Department of Transportation.
- J. Tyree: Thank you for being with us, and you bring up a great place to start. How would you define active transportation?
- B. Vleugels: I would define it as human-powered mode of travel. If it needs legs, like bicycling, walking, rollerblades, anything like that that has nothing to do with a motor, you're looking at active transportation.
- J. Tyree: When ODOT is mentioned or comes to mind, we often think of roads, highways and interstates for cars and trucks. So how and why is the agency involved in active transportation?
- B. Vleugels: Our number one priority for ODOT is safety, first and foremost. So it's our role to make sure that we give active transportation users their own safe space in our infrastructure. And in addition to that, I think active transportation supports the longevity of our infrastructure. It helps us mitigate congestion, and TSET is a good example of this. Active transportation equals public health and sustainability of the environment.
- J. Tyree: I understand you are working on a statewide bicycle map. Can you tell us more about that?
- B. Vleugels: Sure. I took this position just under two years ago, as active transportation coordinator, but our bike map, our statewide bike map is more than five years old. And I certainly have noticed by meeting folks in the community statewide, that there's been a lot of changes in trails, bike lanes, so I really feel the need that it is time to update this. We will make this a paper map at first, so people can just fold it up and we can hand it out to folks at fairs. I know a lot of bicycle stores love to hand those out as well. And I think it's equally important to have a bike infrastructure map, as we do interstates and state highways. ...
- My goal is to emphasize biking, accessible biking infrastructure. So the way I've done that is by collecting a lot of GIS data, not only from cities, but also our TPO's, our ACOG, INCOG. So they've provided me with their active transportation GIS data, including maps, including trails, and we're just going to stack that all on top of each other and make a beautiful map out of it.
- J. Tyree: About when will the updated statewide map be completed?
- B. Vleugels: My goal is to have the map completed and in stores, let's put it that way, by 2026, which is our centennial for the US bike ride. It's before Route 66, yes.

J. Tyree: I look forward to seeing the bike map. What else do you do with active transportation?

B. Vleguels: So as far as pedestrians, they really fall into that same category as bicyclists and when I look at the infrastructure for construction or maintenance. We have an eight-year construction work plan, and my role as active transportation coordinator is to look at those plans. And if there is an indication of crosswalks, sidewalks, bicycle paths, to make sure that the local entities like the cities, the towns are aware, and if there needs to be a dialogue with our district engineer, we can come together and address that.

J. Tyree: ODOT is a state agency, of course, but how closely do you work with cities and towns on active transportation projects?

B. Vleguels: Yes. What we do is we have our Transportation Alternatives Plan. We call it TAP, T-A-P, and part of the funding that we receive, the federal funding that we receive, part of that is Safe Routes to School money. We combine that into our TAP funding, and that's how we distribute the funds. So Safe Routes to School is part of our TAP. For example, last year we had 43 local projects and we distributed over \$36 million, and we will be doing that again this year, late summer, early fall of 2025.

J. Tyree: How can people get involved in local and state projects and programs for bicyclists and pedestrians?

B. Vleguels: I think it's important for folks to really look at your local resources first; cities, towns. What I try to do is send out, I call them my active transportation friends, email. So I distribute information to right now approximately 300 people. So I spread the word via cities, counties, COGs, to the local communities. For folks themselves, I think it would be important if they, so at the local level, get to know your mayor, get to know your city council folks. There's always opportunities to serve on advisory boards, like advisory committees. There's always public meetings. And I think engage in advocacy organizations. One of them that comes to mind is BikeOklahoma. That group is really active promoting bicycling in the state.

J. Tyree: We touched on Route 66 a little earlier, and the Mother Road's 100th anniversary is coming up next year. Will there be any walking or biking events or projects connected with the Route 66 centennial?

B. Vleguels: That would be such an opportunity to experience Route 66 other than in a car or a motorcycle, and we have over 400 miles of US bike route in Oklahoma. The best way to find out about US bike Route 66 events in the state would be to visit oklahomaroute66.com. I think that website is handled by our Oklahoma Tourism Department, and they have a specific sub-page that focuses on US bike Route 66.

J. Tyree: So far we have discussed your role in making roads more accessible for pedestrians and bicyclists at the state level and how folks can do so in their communities. But you, Bart, why are *you* so personally involved in active transportation?

B. Vleugels: My passion for active transportation, I think, is mostly cultural, because I grew up in Belgium where, similar to the Netherlands, that bicycle-pedestrian infrastructure has been in place for many, many years. So I personally am used to riding to school, riding to church, ride to visit my friends. So for me, it's almost a second nature type situation. I think the best way for folks to experience active transportation is to do it. We call it hands-on-the-bars. Put your hands on those bicycle bars and go for a quick ride along the Oklahoma River or in your neighborhood and get a feel for, do you feel safe? How does it make you feel? For me, it was a complete feeling of freedom. And I hope that's what I want to bring with this job, is to give people that opportunity to have that same feeling of freedom when they ride a bike or walk, that they're not scared, that they're not concerned, but that they care really enjoy it and be in the moment.

J. Tyree: There's nothing quite like that simple yet rejuvenating of feeling of freedom and fresh air when you're out taking a walk or riding that bike. Thank you for being with us today, Bart.

B. Vleugels: My pleasure. Thank you very much for having me.

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S. Carson: That was a good conversation about statewide efforts to make roads safer and more accommodating for cyclists and walkers, and how anyone can get involved with local active transportation planning. And I can relate to what Barts said how taking a walk or a bike ride on a nice day can feel great. No wonder May is National Bike Month, with its pleasant spring temperatures on most days.

J. Tyree: It's a great month and season for walking, too, which is why I reached out to TSET Healthy Living Program coordinators in two different counties that had Walk in May events. Hundreds of people participated in fun ways, as we'll soon hear. But first, to further inspire us to get out and walk, Sarah has a list of health benefits that you, me and anyone can gain by simply walking on a regular basis. Drum roll, please ...

S. Carson: Thank you, Sam Carrillo, our audio engineer, for that drum roll. You can gain these health benefits from regular walking, and this comes from the Mayo Clinic website:

- Maintain a healthy weight and lose body fat
 - Prevent or manage various conditions, including heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, cancer and type 2 diabetes
 - Improve cardiovascular fitness

- Strengthen your bones and muscles
- Improve muscle endurance
- Increase energy levels
- Improve your mood, cognition, memory and sleep
- Improve your balance and coordination
- Strengthen immune system
- Reduce stress and tension

J. Tyree: That's outstanding. So with that, let's hear more about efforts involving the TSET Healthy Living Program and their local partners to get more people in their communities up and walking.

S. Keller: My name is Shelby Keller and I am the coordinator for our TSET Healthy Living Program Grant in Payne County.

S. Pendergraft: I'm Stephanie Pendergraft and I am the program coordinator in Garfield County.

K. Ladwig: I am Kate Ladwig, and I work with Stephanie as a program coordinator in Garfield County as well.

J. Tyree: Thank you for joining us today. Let's start by talking about Walk This May events in your communities. What is it and how does it work?

S. Pendergraft: So for Garfield County, this is our fourth annual Walk this May event, we also host a fall event called Walktober in October. It started as a suggestion from our collaborative group, which includes many of the organizations within our community that support us. Our first couple of years we worked to get a lot of support and sponsorships from our community, both in-kind and monetary. I'll let Kate talk about the specifics of our event because she's the guru.

K. Ladwig: Our event, it costs \$15 for our participants to register, and basically with that \$15, they get a free event T-shirt if they've signed up by a certain date and then they get access to the app. We also have a Facebook group and we have a kickoff event that occurs about the week before our event.

And then we also do weekly prizes for our teams and an overall grand prize for the winner. We've partnered with a local shoe company that has graciously been donating gift certificates for those prizes, and then we also now do a raffle drawing for anyone who gets 10,000 steps a day. So 70,000 steps for a week, they get entered into a raffle drawing. We started to do that just because it helps to continue to motivate those that maybe they know that they're not going to be the winner, an overall winner, but they still have a chance to win something at the end. So they have up to four chances if they get those 70,000 steps every week.

S. Pendergraft: We have coordinated group walks weekly. Our OSU Extension office representative coordinates those for us, so we meet up, anyone is welcome. That's in the challenge to show up there. That's just once a week, so obviously that's not considering the other six days of the week and weather permitting, we know how Oklahoma is. So yes, walking in your community or going to a local park, wherever you can get those steps in. If you're in an office and you can walk around the building or inside the building, just anything to try to get that goal of 10,000 steps a day.

J. Tyree: That sounds great – and collaborative. And what happens in Payne County, Shelby?

S. Keller: So similar to Garfield County, we do Walk This May and then we do Walktober in October. To my knowledge, Walk This May has been going on for at least six years and Walktober is going on its ninth year. ~~Our collaborative,~~ We partner with our local chamber to host this event, so we do more of the physical activity, social media, TA side, and our Chamber helps to get sponsorships, share the message, all of that good stuff. So for Walk This May, it's free to sign up. You can compete as an individual or up to a team of five. So far, this year we have 590 people signed up for Walk This May. So there's weekly prizes that you can win. There's an overall gift for the team with the highest steps, a prize for the individual winner.

J. Tyree: From what you have learned, what are some reasons why people participate in Walk This May and similar events?

S. Keller: We have learned that people here in Payne County are incredibly competitive. We have many organizations who have multiple teams. So Stillwater Med, our big hospital, they have at least, I think, 20 teams so far. And for Walk This May, you don't win the big trophy that you do in Walktober, but you get to win bragging rights. So one of the best experiences is just being around town, talking to folks, having them share how this challenge has helped them get back into movement. And with Challenge Runner, you can see everyone's stats. So I feel like it helps push you a little bit to just want to do a little bit more. There's even mom walking groups. There's 5K walking groups. It's just people who are looking to be more active but need more of a collective approach to it. And so that's why a lot of people join this challenge.

K. Ladwig: I would say the same as what Shelby mentioned. And what we did at the end of our challenges, or gearing up between Walk This May and Walktober, was just polled everybody that was already in our Facebook group to really find out what it is about joining these challenges that motivates them to be here. So we give them the options of is it for the prizes? Is it for just the motivation? Is it just encouragement or being part of a team? And really, overall, it was just that, just being part of a team and that whole competitive nature of it. It wasn't about the prizes or anything. It was just what Shelby mentioned, those bragging rights.

J. Tyree: What kind of people register for Walk This May and similar wellness events you've been involved with.

S. Pendergraft: Ours are all across the board. I mean, I was going to add to the last question that I think one thing that's really fun are the team names that people come up with and are competitive. I feel like every year we have some very interesting team names that I think people are so funny in the things they come up with, but during one of our past challenges, we had a user, or I guess a challenge, what do you want to call them? Participant record over a million steps for the month. So yes, we have those that are really walkers, and then we have some that are just trying to be more physically active because they don't walk regularly.

S. Keller: I would say the same thing Stephanie said, especially in the spring, runners are usually training for their marathons, half-marathons, 10 Ks. And so we do see a lot of the people with Walk This May, our serious runners, but we also see the people who are getting out and getting to go hike at our lakes. So it's broad with the type of people that we get. We have so many teams signed up this year. The names are fun. I mean there's one, there's a team from the NICU that works at Stillwater Medical here and there're called the Baby Bundlers. So they get really interesting. The names are fun.

J. Tyree: How is your Healthy Living Program grant involved in Walk This May and Walktober, and why is your program involved?

S. Pendergraft: For Garfield County, we partnered with our Garfield County Health Department and then the OSU Extension office to bring this event to fruition. There used to be a Walk This Way event for, I think there were like eight years of that in the past, and there had been a big break where this didn't exist, so it was brought up that people enjoyed it, and so then of course we decided to do one in May and one in October. We also provide a TSET swag for our bags at the kickoff event, and basically we just want to do anything we can to provide opportunities to community members to be more physically active.

J. Tyree: Are you or were you involved in any other local projects, programs or events that encourage walking, bicycling or any form of active transportation?

S. Keller: We are incredibly involved with that in here in Payne County. And I'd wanted to just highlight something for your previous question that we've done. Our Walk This May is typically surrounded in Stillwater, but we try to spread it over Payne County, but we've also worked with other towns in our county to implement walking challenges, just providing them with information, what to do, how to do it. And so as TSET grantees, one thing that we love doing is highlighting our local walking trails and walking paths. So especially during Walk This May and Walktober, each week, we'll share the walking trail at Boomer Lake or the walking trails at Lake McMurtry just so people are aware of where they can go.

But back to your question about other local projects, so we helped create a bicycle and pedestrian advisory committee for the City of Stillwater. I personally bike and so just with TSET biking, Stillwater didn't really have a group that was an active voice for residents that we're working towards creating safer opportunities and safer environments for pedestrians and cyclists. So we have that. We also helped implement our Ride to Thrive program, which is a biking program for underserved seventh graders or kids who aren't involved in school sports or clubs. We're on our second year, it's all been fundraised for. If they complete the year-long program, they get to keep a bike and all of the gear that goes with it. And so we teach them maintenance, safe riding habits, how to ride around traffic, how to ride around people on trails. We take them all over and have them ride bikes. Our alternative school in Stillwater, Lincoln Academy, they actually received a TSET grant two years ago and they're implementing a bike club.

So we've been helping them with materials, education, things like that. We also have Rails to Trails coming to Stillwater. We're turning our old railroads into trails, and so we've been working with the city on having pedestrian and cycling mine forward and making sure crossings are safe, there's benches, there's lighting, all the good things. And then with our BPAP group, we did a Kameoka bike trail project. So we have a trail in Stillwater called Kameoka Trail, which is our sister city, but the trail was very disconnected throughout town. And so I worked with our BPAP group to create a safe biking trail that connects the Kameoka Trail and it goes north of Stillwater and south of Stillwater. And so as a TSET grantee, we were able to purchase custom-made signs that we spray paint on the ground, not spray, paint on the ground with traffic paint. And so TSET, we bought paint, the custom signs, and we presented that to the city council and they approved our project. So we are rocking and rolling over here doing all of the active transportation things.

S. Pendergraft: Yes. One of the things, a big thing that we're really proud of, we brought a storybook walk to one of our local parks, Champlin Park, which is very centrally located in Enid and I guess in Garfield County as well. It's right where two highways intersect, and it is a park that has a playground and then a really big open field, but it has a walking path, and so we thought that it was a perfect area to put in a storybook walk because a lot of kids go to this park specifically. Not that this can't be for adults too, of course, but it gives them something else to do. The big open field in the center sometimes is used for soccer practices or things like that, but for the most part it's just people there for the playground.

And so we thought what a better place to give them an opportunity to read a book, bring in literature, and then also it gives them certain activities to do from one of the posts to the next, like take five big giant steps or hop like a bunny or whatever the case may be. Usually oriented with the book and it's in a pretty walkable area of town as well. And then we have also conducted a walkability audit of our Downtown Enid area and looking at ways to improve upon that, which they have already improved some of the sidewalks and crosswalks, planted street trees in certain areas, and then we're looking at ways to help with just the aesthetic of that. And then also we did a walk and bike audit of our local skate park just to get an idea of what was needed there as well.

J. Tyree: What are some challenges and barriers for active transportation that you have seen in your local communities?

S. Keller: I would say ours is probably poor infrastructure. Not that our city is doing a bad job, it's just that some areas that are very walkable have not been maintained. So like curb cuts, people who are in wheelchairs, not being able to go over curbs, poor lighting, things like that. That's what we've been trying to work on, those type of things to let the city know that, hey, this area is not being well maintained. And so since we have been working with the city, they actually released a sidewalk project. And so you can go onto, I think they have an app. You can go on the app, take a picture of an area where a sidewalk needs help, put the location, put the issue and send it. And so the city has been gathering all of that information and so they're prioritizing the higher areas of need.

S Pendergraft: More towards the beginning of our grant, we had an active transportation committee that met, we ended up merging that into our collaborative group just because we ended up feeling like we didn't need the second meeting, but we did have city leadership, engineers and people obviously all over the community that were attending that, and we got a lot of good feedback and areas to give information to the city of Enid on projects that they have up and coming, but the engineers are a bit more focused on traffic flow and the vehicular side of that rather than the active modes of transportation, so we were definitely trying to give them not only like the aesthetic, but sidewalks.

That's a big thing for us as well. I mean, we have some neighborhoods that have really great sidewalks, but then you'll get to a point where then this few houses, they don't have a sidewalk in front of it because it was before there was a sidewalk. So looking at ways to make those areas more walkable and we always gave them the feedback with our downtown area and then with our skate park as well, which they completely revamped the skate park parking and sidewalk area down there as well.

J. Tyree: Why is promoting active transportation important for the health of your communities and fellow residents?

S. Pendergraft: I just think generally speaking, we live such sedentary lives, especially with the increase in technology, the need for more work conducted on computers and at desks, and we always kind of need to think outside the box maybe to give opportunities for physical activity, and so we like to try to give those opportunities to our community members to have something to participate in.

S. Keller: So typically, active transportation not only benefits our physical and mental well-being, but it benefits our environment too. It promotes healthy habits, helps to reintegrate or reintroduce a mindset that we don't have to be car-centric, Most of our infrastructure in America is built to prioritize cars first. So I think that we can sustainably use and support active transportation as long as we continue to promote and encourage it.

J. Tyree: Finally, do you have any tips for parents, kids, older folks or anyone who would like to be more physically active but may find it a little tough?

S. Pendergraft: I would say just get up and move. Any physical activity you do outside of your normal day is great. There's chair exercise options, yoga, body weight exercises you can do from home. Walking is obviously great and the weather's perfect right now when it's not raining. Also for parents, when your kids are at sports practices, take a walk outside the facility or inside, depending where you are. Just trying to think of those times when you normally wouldn't take advantage of it, there's usually some way to make it work.

S. Keller: I completely agree with you, Stephanie. Starting is the hardest part. Just do something no matter how small it is. Sometimes when we think about it, it gets a little overwhelming. So I think if you just start small, that helps. And also there's so many free resources out there, YouTube, Instagram, social media – Shape Your Future is a great, I use their stuff all the time, community event calendars, challenges like Walk This May that are free to join, phone a friend, ask someone to hold you accountable or even challenge a friend.

One of my favorite things to do is whenever I don't want to get some movement in, but I know that I need to, I'll go take a walk and watch a movie or listen to a podcast. If you're going grocery shopping, park a little bit further away so you have to walk more. I think focusing on what you can do at that moment in time helps a lot, and then just build on that momentum.

I wanted to add one more thing to this. This is just a personal thing to me. One of my mantras is choose your hard. And I think things are really only as hard as you mentally make them. So if you just know, don't try to view it as something that's hard or that's going to prevent you from doing something, it makes it a little bit easier.

J. Tyree: And Kate, you get the last word. How are you able to stay physically active with your busy schedule?

K. Ladwig: What Stephanie mentioned about when you're a parent and you're at sports practices, what I would do, I would do something very similar. I would take my kids and drop them off at baseball practice and leave my car there. And I knew I needed to be back within an hour. So however far I walked or ran away, I knew I only had one option, and that was to get back by the end of that hour. So very similar to that. I don't know, I'm just pretty motivated to go out and get a walk in right now, actually, after this whole conversation.

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J. Tyree: Garfield and Payne are two of 28 counties that have had a TSET Healthy Living Program grant over the past five years. In that time, they've done a lot to help pass tobacco-free and wellness policies and help residents live healthier, as these coordinators have done with walking events and support for active transportation.

- S. Carson: And Shelby referred to Shape Your Future being an excellent source of ideas for physical activity, which is true for anyone no matter where they live. The website is ShapeYourFutureOK.com and when you click the Get Active tab on the homepage, the site will take you to a wealth of ideas for getting in some physical activity no matter where you are, even if you're short on time. And now that summer break has begun for the kids, the site also has fresh tips for kid-friendly physical activity to keep them going, healthy and occupied during the break. Again, that's ShapeYourFutureOK.com.
- J. Tyree: I also want to repeat a website Bart Vleugels mentioned during our conversation, which was OklahomaRoute66.com for bicycle and other resources relating to historic Route 66 and its centennial in 2026. And a great one-stop shop for cycling news throughout the state is okbike.org.
- S. Carson: I'm with Kate, I feel inspired to go out and take a stroll after hearing today's conversations. We have talked the talk about active transportation and now I'm ready to literally walk the walk. But before we make like peanut butter and jam, we want to thank our guests for joining us today – Bart Vleugels of the Oklahoma Department of Transportation, and TSET Healthy Living Program coordinators Stephanie Pendergraft and Kate Ladwig of Garfield County and Shelby Keller of Payne County.
- J. Tyree: And, as always, we thank you, our listeners.
- S. Carson: Speaking of which, you can listen to this or any episode of the TSET Better Health Podcast at oklahoma.gov/tset/podcast or anywhere you listen to podcasts. So until next time, this is Sarah Carson ...
- J. Tyree: And James Tyree wishing you peace,
- S. Carson: And better health!