

Obesity is gaining in Texas

We need walkable cities, PE in schools, says **Eric Van Steenburg of Lakewood**

Remember what the humans looked like in the Oscar-nominated animated film *Wall-E*? They were slothful tubs of goo, too weakened by their own flabbiness to get off their individual floating couches while surrounded by personalized electronic gizmos. That was supposed to be centuries in the future. Well, the future is approaching faster than we think.

A study by the state of Texas released last week revealed that the Lone Star State doesn't fit very well into its old jeans. It seems some 5 million people living here



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are obese. The study, sponsored by the Texas Health Institute, revealed that if things continue as they are today, there will be 15 million obese people in Texas just three decades from now. No, that's not 10 million people moving from the North. That's Texans being slothful tubs of goo.

But Texas is a big state. That means the majority of us aren't obese, and therefore shouldn't worry. Right? Wrong.

The costs of taking care of obese people are staggering. Dallas County already leads the state in the percentage of obese citizens. The study says the number of obese people in the

county will near 50 percent by 2040. And when these folks need increased medical care because of their condition, who pays?

You do, whether you're obese or not. Medical costs at Parkland Hospital are covered by your tax dollars. Less productive workers put more pressure on you to perform. And as businesses choose other, healthier communities for their operations, North Texans lose out on economic development.

This trend is even more alarming among our youth. According to the National Institute on Aging, the current generation of young Americans is the first that won't outlive their parents. Why? Obesity-related illness, disease and death. And the Texas study found that from 2000 to 2007, the percentage of obese young adults in our state doubled.

Instead of pointing fingers at who is to blame for this epidemic — and yes, it is an epidemic identified by the U.S. surgeon general way back in 2001, when costs associated with obesity were only \$117 billion — let's talk about solutions.

Jane Nelson, the state senator from Flower Mound, is pushing once again to require physical education the entire year for middle school students. We should all support her efforts. Amazingly, pre-teens in Texas are allowed to skip PE classes for one-third of the year. And PE isn't even required in high school.

But that's not nearly enough. Cities, school districts and even principals can make changes

now that impact the health of their students tomorrow.

For example, we've built communities that are less walkable than we did in the past. My neighborhood doesn't even have sidewalks. Let's build more of them.

Forty years ago, half of the children going to school got there by walking. Today, that number is only 14 percent. If more kids walked to and from school, we'd shrink their waistlines and clean the air — because we'd have fewer SUVs and minivans idling in the parking lots.

The city of Dallas should create better walking and biking options for all its residents. A study on safe routes to school would kick-start the issue.

At the school level, removing vending machines with junk food makes an immediate impact. For long-term benefits, though, the answer is to get kids moving again. Implementing the recommendations of the safe routes study can accomplish that.

Each year, more than 300,000 people die from obesity-related illnesses. Isn't that enough reason for all of us to start making changes now, before it's too late?



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