

April 17, 2014 Tribes, city, NSU launch Tons Off Tahlequah campaign

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Photo by Sean Rowley/Daily Press Oklahoma City Mayor Mick Cornett was the keynote speaker Wednesday during the stakeholder luncheon to launch Tons Off Tahlequah at the Tahlequah Event Center. The campaign encourages area residents to shed 30,000 pounds by March 2015.

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TAHLEQUAH — When studies are conducted about whether Americans are living healthy lifestyles, Oklahoma often ranks poorly among the states.

Oklahomans have high rates of heart disease, diabetes and obesity. On Wednesday, a campaign was begun to encourage the people of Tahlequah to shed a few pounds.

Tons Off Tahlequah is organized by the Foundation for a Fit Future. The foundation was created through a partnership of Northeastern State University, the Cherokee Nation, the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians and the city of Tahlequah.

The initiative asks area residents to lose a total of 30,000 pounds by March 2015.

Mick Cornett, Oklahoma City mayor, delivered the keynote address. Tons Off Tahlequah is modeled on the OKC Million initiative of 2008. More than 47,000 participants lost more than a million pounds.

“We were beginning to make some of the lists that told of positive economic news, but then the list for the most obese cities came out,” Cornett said. “We were on that list with a lot of cool cities: Dallas, Houston, New Orleans, Atlanta. These aren’t cities people are ashamed to be associated with, but I didn’t like Oklahoma City being on the most-obese list.”

Cornett said he and others tried to determine the reasons behind the obese lifestyles of Oklahoma City residents.

“One day it dawned on me that we had created an incredible quality of life – if you happen to be a car,” he said. “If you were a person, you were battling the automobile at every turn. We had wide streets because a horse and buggy needed a lot of room to turn around. We hadn’t changed the street widths since 1889. If someone pushed the ‘walk-don’t walk’ button, they had to run.”

Along with the OKC Million campaign, Oklahoma City also created infrastructure to encourage citizens to exercise.

“The city built 400 miles of sidewalks, which made of for years of not requiring developers to build them along streets,” Cornett said. “We are building the jogging and biking trail systems. We always had a bike trail master plan, we just never funded it. We are also building senior health and wellness centers.”

After the campaign, Cornett said he visited the offices of Men’s Fitness, which published the 2005 list that named Oklahoma City among America’s fattest.

“The current issue was on the table,” he said. “It’s headline was ‘America’s Fattest Cities: Do You Live In One?’ I opened it and checked the obesity rankings to see if we had improved. We weren’t on it. I turned the page, and we were No. 22 on the list of fittest cities.”

The guest speaker was Dr. David C. Gahn, an OB/GYN at W.W. Hastings Hospital. After showing some data slides, Gahn discussed the importance of policy when dealing with health issues.

“[Cherokee Nation] Chief [Bill John] Baker’s public health department is everywhere in the 14 counties,” Gahn said. “They visit schools, churches and parks, and we’re helping people learn how to have fun and be healthy at the same time.”

The call for action was given by NSU President Steve Turner, Mayor Jason Nichols, UKB Chief George Wickliffe and Baker.

The initiative includes the Tons Off Tahlequah 5K, which begins at 8 a.m. on April 26 at Norris Park.

For more information about the challenge and the 5K, visit www.FoundationforaFitFuture.org.