

# *How Somerville Became* **'The Fittest City in America'**

*By MICHAEL MEEHAN*



**Government often pledges to trim the fat, but the city of Somerville decided to take the phrase literally** by developing an ambitious program to tackle childhood obesity. Nearly a decade later, Somerville has been recognized as the Healthiest City in Massachusetts by the Massachusetts Health Council, and the city's program, called Shape Up Somerville, has helped to reshape the city as much as the people in it.

The genesis of Shape Up Somerville was a 2002 Tufts University study of first through third graders in Somerville, which determined that forty percent of those children were overweight or obese. "It was shocking how out of shape and inactive these very young children were," Somerville Mayor Joseph Curtatone recalls. "And when you see a number like that, it grabs your attention and makes it clear that this is a cultural problem, not just a handful of extra couch potatoes. The natural inclination for kids that age is to run around and play. We had gotten so far away from that it was almost like kids had stopped being kids."

*Michael Meehan is the Communications Director for the city of Somerville.*

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While the program started with a limited focus on elementary school students, it has since blossomed into a citywide initiative that informs nearly every decision that's made in Somerville. "Obviously the problem isn't isolated to first, second and third graders," says Shape Up Somerville Director Jaime Corliss. "These children are the product of an environment. So our goal is to change the environment."

The change has been so profound that it caught the eye of First Lady Michelle Obama, who used Shape Up Somerville as a model for the federal Let's Move! program. Mayor Curtatone has been asked to speak at the White House and is now sought as a speaker around the country on the topic of building a healthier community.

### Physical Changes

Somerville has undergone some notable physical changes in recent years—changes that are specifically directed at making a busy and congested city more conducive to physical activity and healthy living. City government has built

or renovated eighteen parks and playgrounds since Curtatone took office in 2004—a remarkable number in a city of just 4.1 square miles. In 2010, Somerville more than doubled its bike lanes by adding ten miles. Plans are afoot to add even more bike lane markings in 2011.

The biggest physical change ultimately may be the reintroduction of mass transit through the heart of the city. The Green Line extension from Lechmere, which should be completed by 2015, and a new Orange Line stop near Assembly Square, will radically change the way people can get to, from and around Somerville. Just fifteen percent of Somerville residents currently live within a half mile of a mass transit station. Once the new stations are opened, the number will jump to eighty-five percent.

"A century ago, this city was built around trolley lines," Curtatone says. "It brought in factories and people to work in those factories. Then, after World War II, we planned everything around the automobile. Now we're going back to our public transit roots, and people should be healthier for it. Plus, we're the most

densely populated city in New England. We have a glaring need for mass transit."

### Healthy Eating

When Tufts put together its program in 2002, it started with data. It collected Body Mass Index statistics to set a baseline and then sought to improve the diet of the children in the study. Unhealthy items were removed from school lunches and replaced with fresh produce, whole grains and low-fat dairy products. Taste tests of new, healthier menu items were organized. No longer were the schools re-heating frozen trays of food. School culinary staff had to learn how to cook from scratch for the nearly 5,000 students in the system. "We actually had to renegotiate working conditions with the food service workers union to make that happen," says Somerville Schools Superintendent Anthony Pierantozzi. "It was a radical change at the time, but now we'd never consider going back to the way we used to do things."

Students and parents were educated on how to make healthier eating choices, and more rigorous physical activity was built into the school day as well as after-school programs. The School Department also began a new walk-to-school program.

"Your schools are essential to running a program like this," Corliss says. "It's where you can have your most immediate, and ultimately greatest, impact." Sure enough, getting kids to eat a better diet and get more exercise made a substantial difference. The elementary schoolchildren did not turn into beanpoles overnight, but their BMI numbers began to decrease.

While the work was being done in the schools, the city opened a weekly farmers market in Union Square and developed a municipal employee wellness program. The program was funded by Robert Wood Johnson's Healthy Eating by Design and Active Living by Design grants.

In 2005, however, the Tufts program was coming to a close. If Shape Up Somerville were to continue, city government would need to fill the void. "It really came down to a values decision," Curtatone says. "Did we really want to be a healthier community? It definitely would have been easier for everyone to declare victory, pat themselves on the back and walk away."

### Where to Start a Healthier Living Program

#### Infrastructure

- Paint crosswalks and bike lanes
- Provide adequate bike racks
- Incorporate traffic-calming measures into road design
- Add or widen sidewalks
- Create a walking trail
- Turn vacant lots into community gardens
- Upgrade parks and open spaces
- Start an open streets program
- Rezone neighborhoods to promote mixed-use development and walkability

#### Food

- Start a farmers market, and make sure it accepts EBT/SNAP
- Make your community a community-supported agriculture drop-off site

- Eliminate vending machines from schools and municipal buildings, or replace them with healthier versions
- Start a healthy restaurant program
- Set healthy guidelines for food served at municipal meetings and events

#### Schools

- Start a farm-to-school program
- Set healthier guidelines for school breakfasts and lunches
- Work with your parent-teacher organizations to make fundraising healthier
- Start a school garden program
- Sign up for Safe Routes to School
- Incorporate physical activity and nutrition into the curriculum of after-school programs

— Michael Meehan



(clockwise from top left) Somerville Mayor Joseph Curtatone (right) poses with young residents during the National Night Out event. New bike racks promote human-powered transportation. Mayor Curtatone participates in a walking event with city youth. Accessible farmers markets promote healthy diets.

## City Steps Up

City government decided in favor of healthier living and began seeking grant money. The city went back to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, received a Massachusetts' Health Disparities grant, and was awarded money from the federal Centers for Disease Control, which has since declared obesity to be a national epidemic. Somerville hired a full-time director for Shape Up Somerville, along with a program coordinator, to conceive and implement healthy living initiatives in the city. What followed was student-maintained gardens in local schools, program-approved menu items at local restaurants, and the acceptance of electronic benefit transfer cards at local farmers markets.

In 2010, Somerville began shutting

down miles of busy local thoroughfares to vehicle traffic on select weekend dates and opening the streets to pedestrians and bicyclists. Local merchants have become involved in the "open streets" events, as have local artisans, who carved giant pumpkins with chainsaws at the 2010 finale in October. The festival atmosphere and the opportunity to stroll down the middle of the street now draws thousands. "If it can help you eat better and exercise more, we try to do it," Corliss says.

The work in Somerville's schools, meanwhile, has been gaining national attention. Somerville's school lunch program now boasts two consecutive HealthierUS awards from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. "We're a city known for our restaurants," Curtatone says, "but on any given weekday some

of the best food being served within our borders is inside our school cafeterias."

## Health Everywhere

A key tenet of Shape Up Somerville is that the transformation needed to combat the obesity epidemic could not be limited to a single department. Curtatone brings his executive buy-in to every project the city undertakes. "We plan for pedestrians and bicyclists, not just motorists," he says. "That has become an essential part of our major streetscape projects. The nice thing is that it also makes for a more attractive boulevard, which is good for local businesses."

Even the city's tree planting program is tied in with Shape Up Somerville, because people are more likely to get out and stroll around in an area where plants

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are growing and alive. "When I grew up in Somerville back in the 1970s, we were famous for not having many trees," Curtatone says. "We're changing the entire look of the city and my children will grow up here in a way that's far different than the way I did. In many ways, it's like a totally different city."

The city has taken over management of former state-owned open spaces and recreational facilities. Somerville now manages a significant portion of its Mystic River waterfront. In 2006, the city partnered with the Division of Conservation and Recreation to renovate Dilboy Stadium along the Arlington border. The 3,000-seat facility now hosts many regional football, soccer and track events. (It also serves as the home field for the championship-winning Boston Militia women's football team.) Adjacent field and tennis courts, along with a playground and a Conservation and Recreation pool, provide recreational opportunities for residents. "Field space is at a premium given that we're densely populated, even compared to most urban municipalities," Curtatone says. "It was critical for us to upgrade Dilboy. And the state deserves a lot of credit for understanding how critical that was and working with us."

The success of the Dilboy arrangement led Somerville to take over management of the Veterans Memorial Skating Rink from the Division of Conservation and Recreation recently. Extensive renovations have improved concessions and added a pro shop, wifi access, and flat screen televisions in the lobby. The rink will be open ten months a year instead of six, offering significantly more ice time to local youth groups. After just a few short months, the rink schedule is already filled up, which should make the facility self-sustaining in its first year of operation. "The outpouring of interest from the public has been tremendous," says rink manager John Teves. "Our goal is to make this one of the best ice facilities in metro Boston, and we're well on our way."

The rink happens to reside along Somerville Avenue, which was the major streetscape improvement, complete with new bike lanes, that was completed last September. It also happens to be the location of the city's open streets finale, and just down the street from the Union Square farmers market. "It's amazing how everything starts fitting together when you

take healthier living into consideration in everything you do," Curtatone says.

### Brave New World

Shape Up Somerville is taking on new challenges both inside and outside of Somerville. One of the things officials have discovered is the extent to which health issues are really equity issues. Families that have the least are leading the unhealthiest lifestyles. Parents who work multiple jobs just to pay the bills often don't have the time to prepare a healthy meal, and they often feel like healthy items such as fresh produce are outside their budget. "That isn't necessarily true," Corliss says, "but when you're squeezed for time and money, you don't have a lot of space to reassess your grocery shopping habits."

Lower-income families also tend to be more transient, moving where work and circumstances take them. A child in a transient family might not spend enough time in Somerville for the Shape Up Somerville program to have a meaningful impact. Parents in those families also are not likely to be as familiar with the city and its programs, events and recreational opportunities.

In order to tackle the equity problem, Somerville is seeking to collect finer-grained data, tracking students in specific populations. The city also is looking to create more targeted programs for those most at-risk in terms of obesity. EBT purchases at the farmers market are only a first step. The city will seek to bring produce directly into its lower-income housing developments and to develop multilingual materials and programs.

Somerville is also hoping to convince other communities to start similar healthy community programs. "Healthy living doesn't stop at the city line," Curtatone says. "The effectiveness of our program will be enhanced if other cities and towns take similar steps. Fewer people will slip through the cracks, and we'll be able to make this into a regional effort, learning from each other's best practices."

What started as a study of overweight schoolchildren has now grown into a national model for combating the obesity epidemic in the United States. In his speaking engagements, Curtatone warns against expectations of instant success and encourages civic leaders to focus on the long-term consequences of their policy decisions. "In the end it comes down to making healthy living part of our daily routines," he says. "We live in the world we build for ourselves and we can build one that encourages people to be more active and to eat better." 🌟