

SCALING DOWN OKLAHOMA CITY

By Adrian Brown

LATER THIS YEAR, BCG will launch the *Centre for Public Impact*, a not-for-profit global foundation that will bring together world leaders to learn, exchange ideas, and share stories of government impact from around the world. Mayor Mick Cornett of Oklahoma City knows all about impact; his pioneering antiobesity program persuaded city residents to lose a total of more than 1 million pounds. How did he do it?

In February 2007, Oklahoma City (OKC) Mayor Mick Cornett picked up a copy of *Men's Fitness* magazine. Flipping through the pages, he paused at a story naming OKC “the city with the worst eating habits” and the fifteenth most obese population in the U.S. For Cornett, a fourth-generation Oklahoman who was born and raised in OKC, this proved something of an epiphany. He decided it was time to make some changes.

First he headed to the scales to check his own weight. “I was 217 pounds,” he says. “So I went to a government website, typed in my height and weight, and it said I was obese.” Shocked, he set about losing

weight, shedding a pound a week for the next 40 weeks. Mission accomplished? He was just getting started.

“Along the way I started examining my city—its culture and infrastructure—trying to find out why we seemed to have a problem with obesity,” he recalls. The prevalence and importance of the car to the citizens of OKC soon emerged as a critical factor because it meant that very few people walked anywhere. “Our city is spread out,” Cornett explains. “We’re one of the largest cities in the country in terms of geographic area and there is no traffic congestion to speak of. And many neighborhoods have no level of walkability, as developers weren’t required to build sidewalks in new developments.” He decided that the first thing he needed to do was start a conversation.

It’s Good to Talk

Mayor Cornett believed that one of the main reasons obesity had gained a foothold in OKC was the reluctance of people

to talk about it. To change this, he drew on his background in the media. Knowing that late December is traditionally a quiet news period in which reporters like to write New Year's resolution stories, Cornett held a press conference on December 31, 2007, to announce his mission for the city's citizens to lose 1 million pounds.

"It was like there were a lot of people who knew we needed to do something, but it wasn't a subject that was openly discussed," he says. "It was something that was just kind of ignored. And so when I decided that we weren't going to ignore it anymore, it allowed people to feel more comfortable bringing it up. This then led to employers talking about it to their employees, church pastors talking about it to their congregations, and even people at home talking about it with members of their family."

A new website was launched to register people in the program and give them a place to find healthy diet tips, learn the location of public parks, and get answers to common questions regarding obesity. The website tracked the number of people who signed up and provided a group weight-loss counter. Users who registered could track their progress and stay motivated. And they did so in large numbers.

"There was very little cynicism, in part because there was no government money spent on the program," says Cornett. "A friend of mine did the website and it was up to me to get media attention, but there was no government money involved. More than anything, this was an 'awareness campaign', and it is undeniable that it got people talking about obesity and health issues in general."

Media Matters

Before entering government service, Cornett spent 20 years in local television, first in sports and later in news. Having worked as a reporter, presenter, and manager, as well as a newspaper columnist and sports announcer, he understood the rhythm of news making and what reporters require to keep a story alive.

"Getting the media on board was very important," he says. "One of the problems of government health-care programs is that they make a splash in the media for one day and then two days later nobody is talking about it. So what we tried to do was keep it in front so that the newspapers ran updates of how many people had signed up and how much weight was lost every day for several months. Every three months, I would hold a press conference and bring people with me who had lost significant amounts of weight so they could tell their story. By doing that, I was able to keep the story fresh and in front of people so they would keep talking about it."

The private sector also played a part. Although Oklahoma's official state meal features chicken fried steak and pecan pie, Mayor Cornett stresses that local restaurants embraced the initiative wholeheartedly. "Many chefs in our top restaurants used the campaign to come up with some healthy meals that were low fat and low calorie, kind of in a competition among themselves," he says. "People were going to restaurants trying to find the healthiest thing on the menu, and the chefs had to react to this new demand."

A Lasting Impact

The initiative soon drew nationwide attention. The mayor made frequent appearances on talk shows and spoke to audiences around the country. With residents continuing to move toward the million-pound goal, the conversation turned to the design of the city itself.

"We used the new awareness to illustrate to our citizens that they lived in a city where everything revolved around the car," Cornett says. "We held a referendum on putting new, pedestrian-friendly elements into our infrastructure, and voters approved a 1 cent sales tax, set to expire after seven years, with a target of raising \$777 million. Now we're building hundreds of miles of sidewalks, new jogging and biking trails throughout the city, landscaping and narrowing streets to make them more interesting to walk. We're creating a city that is de-

signed around people, rather than being designed around the car.” Businesses provided an additional \$140 million through loans that will be paid back through boosted tax revenue and property taxes. These funds have helped make the downtown area a more pleasant place to walk and have also funded new bike lanes, public art, and a revamped botanical garden.

In January 2012, OKC reached its million-pound target. The success prompted Mayor Cornett and several local partici-

pants, each of whom had lost over 100 pounds, to travel to New York City for a round of media appearances about the campaign and the dangers of obesity. It was on this trip that Cornett, waiting to meet with a reporter from *Men’s Fitness*, picked up a copy of the March 2012 issue. “Do you live in one of the fattest cities in America?” asked the headline on the front cover. Well, for Mayor Cornett and the residents of OKC, the answer is a definitive no. Instead, they now live in one of the top 25 fittest cities in America.

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