Local data can be a powerful tool for cities to recognize and address health and economic issues. Nearly two decades ago, City of Brownsville leadership was confronted with alarming statistics about obesity and diabetes, and began to make the connection between health problems and economic challenges. Fifteen years later, a multi-sector coalition is tackling both, and spurring a locally grown fitness and wellness industry led by millennial entrepreneurs who have set up small businesses like gyms, cycling shops, stand-up paddle board and kayaking tours, trail cafes, healthy restaurant options, farmers’ markets, community gardens, and urban farms along a network of new and planned urban and rural hike and bike trails, transforming the landscape and health of local residents.

The momentum around wellness in Brownsville has spread to other smaller communities across Cameron County, replicating Brownsville’s efforts to focus on health and wellness. This has led to an historic ten-city partnership on an award-winning plan for a 428-mile network of multiuse trails, bicycle routes and waterways for paddling that capitalize on the area’s rich natural and cultural resources, including unmatched birding, the Gulf coastline, historical significance, local cuisine, waterways and a semi-tropical climate. The plan will draw tourists from neighboring Mexico and the United States, and will provide infrastructure for use by local residents, improving health and bringing funding and tourism dollars to the region. Washington, D.C.-based Rails-to-Trails Conservancy has taken on this plan as a project of national significance and is helping to attract funding and attention to the area.

These efforts began almost twenty years ago in 2001, when the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth) School of Public Health opened a small campus in Brownsville. Local data about the health status of...
residents in Brownsville and the Rio Grande Valley had not been collected. UTHealth began to study the local population through the Cameron County Hispanic (Longitudinal) Cohort Study. Researchers reached out across sectors to business leaders, local school districts, clergy, and non-profit organizations to form a Community Advisory Board to share and address alarming findings. These findings showed that the area had higher obesity and diabetes rates than almost anywhere in the nation, with one in three adults having diabetes, and more than 80 percent of the population being overweight or obese. These statistics contributed to an unhealthy workforce, lost wages, a high burden of disability including amputations, dialysis, loss of eyesight, and early death from complications of diabetes, obesity, chronic disease, and cancer associated with unhealthy lifestyles.

Initially, the Community Advisory Board recognized that though a large and fast growing City, Brownsville residents were not exposed to the benefits of exercise and healthy eating options offered in other places of similar size. With only one small gym and minimal exercise spaces, coupled with fast-food restaurants and a culture somewhat disconnected from fresh fruits and vegetables and unfamiliar and afraid of active transportation or cycling, leaders knew they needed to educate and spark the interest of locals.

The City partnered with UTHealth to increase exposure to cycling, exercise, and healthy food choices through free community-wide programs like CycloBlas (open streets) and The Challenge, a friendly and free weight loss competition featuring prizes, cooking classes, and fitness opportunities, as well as text message support and active, outdoor family events. Tu Salud ¡Si Cuenta! (Your Health Matters!), an initiative funded through UTHealth, provides dozens of free exercise classes, from Latin dance and yoga to walking clubs, in neighborhoods across the city, led by community health workers who provide screening and education and a media campaign. All of these efforts have led to a Brownsville citizenry more aware and interested in being active and getting healthy.

Rose Gowen, local physician and city councilmember, has taken the lead to rally other local elected officials in a new vision to build an environment and policies that promote health and capitalize on the natural resources, history, and assets of the region. In 2014, the City of Brownsville was awarded the prestigious Culture of Health Prize by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for efforts to improve health.

Over the last few years, trails have gone in on abandoned rail lines, and small businesses have popped up all over
town serving a young and growing population increasingly interested in fitness and health. The City now boasts dozens of gyms; cycle shops; healthy option cafes; cycling, walking, and running clubs; and multiple races, runs, and rides every weekend. In 2016, the crown jewel for the area–The Lower Rio Grande Valley Active Transportation and Tourism Plan ("The Active Plan") --was conceived and led by Brownsville in partnership with the county’s smaller towns and cities. According to a recent economic impact study by the Harbinger Group, The Active Plan’s six catalyst projects, when complete, are projected to bring $39.6 million a year in tourism to Cameron County, create 554 jobs with $57 million in total economic impact, and $9 million in local state and federal taxes. The impact on the local residents beyond economic growth is medical cost savings, estimated at $3 to $6 million annually.

The six catalyst projects focus on connecting the towns and cities in Cameron County, and on significant and potential tourist draws such as the Laguna Madre segment of trail, which is part of the United States Bicycle Route system and will provide a scenic route through pristine wetlands to the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. The Historic Battlefield Trail currently runs eight miles through Brownsville with access to the city’s celebrated historic downtown architecture, award-winning zoo, museums and cafes, ending at the Palo Alto Battlefield National Historic Park and will eventually connect to the City of Los Fresnos. The catalyst phase emphasizes the importance of the Queen Isabella Causeway to South Padre Island to include barrier-protected pedestrian/bike lanes. The six catalyst projects include the Arroyo-Resaca, Bahia Grande, Battlefield, and South Padre Island multiuse trail segments, the Laguna Madre bicycle route, and the Arroyo Colorado paddling trail which meanders under a draw bridge in Rio Hondo.

Gowen shared, "Introducing our people to active transportation and healthy living is not just fun and healthy, but it’s also driving small business growth. Our unique eco-environment enjoyed by visitors from a bicycle, on a hike, or from a kayak establishes us as an active tourist and bicycle destination."

Providing local data to decision-makers to create multi-sector momentum around wellness has resulted in partnerships in Brownsville and across Cameron County, as well as a focus on historic, cultural and natural assets, and a bold vision for the region to address the real health and economic challenges.

Gowen continued, "Tourists from far beyond our area are already visiting and extending their stays as they realize we will be building on the trails and routes. This economic growth is just beginning and already felt by local businesses and entrepreneurs. Active transportation and tourism protects our environment, makes our people healthier, and is a meaningful economic development tool."