

Gordon Petrie Walking College Fellow

Mayor Gordon Petrie Never Loses a Good Challenge

Gordon Petrie never loses a good challenge. The 69-year-old mayor of Emmett, Idaho is a former Army officer, lawyer, and trial judge with a strong competitive streak. For two years in a row, Petrie has won the Southern Idaho Mayor's School Walking Challenge, earning thousands of dollars for sports and activity equipment for schools in his town. Petrie has created momentum around movement in Emmett, setting a good example by out-walking his fellow mayors and signing up with the National League of Cities' Let's Move! initiative, all while working hard to repair and rebuild the city's sidewalks. From there, he turned to his next challenge—completing the Walking College Fellowship program to arm him with the connections and information needed to make positive changes to his community.



From Advocate to Walking College Fellow

Mayor Petrie believes in leading by example. Petrie ensured his town's good showing in the National League of Cities' Let's Move! challenges. "When I was appointed as mayor, I made sure that we met all of the goals in each of the areas, whether it was for healthy communities having to do with healthy snacks and foods in the schools or just movement itself," he says. "In all of the areas where you could get medals, we got the bronze, the silver and the gold."

As Emmett racked up medals with Let's Move!, Mayor Petrie also worked with city staff to develop a 5-year strategic plan, which spelled out goals around becoming a health-conscious city and coming into compliance with ADA laws. Petrie applied to the Walking College seeking information and advice about how to take the necessary steps to fix the city's sidewalks and get people moving more consistently. He was accepted in April 2016 and spent the next several months learning everything he could.

"I knew that for something as fundamental as walking, I really didn't know much," Petrie explains. "I needed to at least have the resources ... if I'm going to, every pun intended, 'walk the walk' in order to 'talk the talk,' I wanted to be able to say, 'Well, when I attended the Walking College, this is what we found in the literature,' so I'm not just making stuff up."

Even though Petrie knew he wanted to tackle the sidewalk problem when he joined the Walking College, he learned from readings, mentors and fellow students about how providing basic infrastructure is just one aspect of building a walkable city.

"My vision of getting folks to walk to the store instead of driving to the store has been broadened somewhat by learning that we need to make it rewarding and pleasant. We really do need to get the right trees in here and get the kind of tree that is not going to push up the sidewalk and yet still provide shade. We need some open spaces. There are some blighted places downtown that we were able to clean up and had private folks take over our efforts in making them more and more beautiful."

Beyond the Classroom

What Petrie gained most from the Walking College was greater insight into the social justice and equity issues involved in walkability.

“We really, really have not paid attention to those with disabilities,” he says. “We have not done the right thing by them. Or kids, trying to get to school when it’s still dark because of our weird mountain standard time, which is really an hour ahead of the sun. The kids, in the wintertime, have to be at school at 7:30 and it’s essentially dark or dusky until 8:30 in December and January ... but there are whole blocks on both sides of the street where you won’t find any sidewalks. It’s a tragedy, and we’ve been more lucky than smart.”

The mayor continues, “My rough exterior notwithstanding, I really am a compassionate guy. I really do care about human beings who are placed in situation that isn’t necessarily their fault. It’s not the fault of the aged, it’s not the fault of the young, it’s not the fault of those who are disabled in this town that for decades past city leaders just wanted to make the easy decision – the easy political decision. Knowing that people don’t like to spend money, they said, ‘By golly, we won’t spend money on anything!’ But that’s not the right answer when you have people who can’t get safely from one place to another. That’s the wrong answer.”



As a result of the contacts he made in the Walking College, Petrie has gotten his city involved in applying for Safe Routes to School grants to help fund some of the necessary improvements. And now, the city of Emmett works with a contractor to repair cracked and broken sidewalks, partnering with property owners in a more collaborative way than in the past.

As the city comes into compliance with ADA requirements and makes it easier for more people to walk more often, Petrie is seeing changes in residents’ attitudes toward fitness, too.

“Along the way, we’ve had the second- and third-order effects from the initiative – the realization that we need to start moving. We eat too much and we sit around too much and we drive too much and none of that is healthy for us. Slowly but surely, old fashioned movement is gaining traction.”

Petrie credits the Walking College with giving him a good foundation for approaching the public and framing the message in such a way that people can hear it. By talking about the sidewalk initiative and preparing their approach over the past year, Petrie and his staff have won buy-in from the community. And for this tough-guy, competitive mayor, some softer lessons from Walking College colleagues made an impact, too. “I learned a little bit about patience and a little more humility and waiting for the right opportunity before you strike and you actually have a complete plan,” he says.

“What we’ve done is raise the level of movement here in the city. We’re trying our best to make this a more walkable city.”

To others who want to improve the conditions for walking in their communities, Petrie encourages persistence. “Don’t be disheartened if it doesn’t get traction right away,” he advises. “Great movements always start small. As long as you can build momentum and spread the good news of how probably the best form of transportation will give you the best health benefits, people get that concept, they’ll be fine. You have to be patient. Know your audience. Know the enemy. Be prepared to counter what they might come up with – ‘Oh, it’s too hard, it’s too this or that.’ Well, watching your loved ones die of heart disease and other ailments because they just didn’t take care of themselves is tougher than creating a walkable community. A walkable community is a friendlier community and is more economically viable because are interacting with one another.”