

Truro Wins Through Healthy Competition

By Amy Pugsley Fraser

A three-month fitness challenge in Truro's Public Works Department has created a fitter workforce through a little healthy competition.

Department Director Andrew MacKinnon came up with the Public Works Challenge after a few employees experienced major health issues.

"We really wanted to do something for heart health," he said.

MacKinnon experienced his own fitness epiphany almost two decades ago when he visited Denmark with a Federation of Canadian Municipalities energy mission.

"I just could not believe how fit Europeans were, especially in Copenhagen where everybody walks or bikes."

It was a different picture back home, where people will drive one block to go to the store.

"In the more rural towns, you do that. And here I am, the one in charge of making our sidewalks in good shape, but I'm not out walking on them."

After seeing the Danes in action, MacKinnon came home and took up running. His health commitment lasted more than a decade but had recently started to slip, he says.

A few Truro town departments, like Police and Fire, have health and fitness programs. Without a dedicated regime for Public Works, MacKinnon decided to create some in-house incentive for his team to get fit.

He started with the nuts and bolts of healthy living by bringing in a nutritionist to speak to staff. Then he capitalized on the competitive nature of the department's employees by creating a contest that divided the 50 staff into operations teams, including Engineering, Transportation Services, Environmental Services, and the Water Treatment Plant.

A series of warmups were introduced in the public works building for crews to limber up before starting their shifts. And employees were encouraged to work out on their lunch hour or after work.

Throughout the three-month run, the teams kept track of weight and Body Mass Index (BMI) – and calculated the improvements for each team. Points were allocated for the total drop in team BMI, with bonuses given for quitting smoking.

At one point, Truro council chambers was doing double duty as a cross-fit studio for some of the town hall employees.

"We'd always find dumbbells against the wall in the back, which is kind of a funny thing to find in chambers," Truro CAO Mike Dolter said this week.

He saw the value of the contest from the outset and approved a team prize of a vacation day granted to each member of the winning team. While Truro has yet to track the long-term effects, Dolter says the anecdotal evidence is stacking up.

“We haven’t seen a direct correlation with sick days yet, but everybody took something positive from the experience.”

While two staffers quit smoking, nine others had a significant drop in their weight and body mass index, with one employee losing 34 pounds and decreasing BMI by 4.8. Researchers say that losing just five percent of your body weight can boost heart health.

“We’ve seen a difference in the level of lunchtime walking, and people doing fitness after work.”

And there’s room for more: The town has an annual \$300 grant for all employees to use toward physical fitness, and it can be used anywhere, he said. They’re also looking at constructing shower facilities in the basement of town hall, so people can grab a shower after a mid-day work out.

The results are spurring a second health challenge for 2020 with a wider net of departments. It will focus more on fitness, with bonus points for joining a gym, upping weekly step counts, or giving up smoking.

“I applaud Public Works for leading it off, because we really do need to contribute to creating healthier employees,” Dolter said.

About the Municipal Workplace Wellness Program

- AMANS/NSFM Wellness Program presented the Municipal Workplace Wellness Innovator Award to Truro for its Public Works Challenge during the Association of Municipal Administrators annual fall conference in Digby. It’s the highest honour awarded through the program.
- Truro plans to build on its success by launching the Public Works Challenge II in 2020.
- The new program will include more town departments and offer more incentives for employees to quit smoking, stay fit and get healthy.
- The Municipal Wellness Program was established in 2014. It is a partnership between the Association of Municipal Administrators, NS and the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities.