TO:               HONORABLE CITY COUNCIL

FROM:            CITY MANAGER              DEPARTMENT: COMMUNITY SERVICES

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REPORT TYPE: INFORMATION REPORT

SUBJECT:     Let’s Go PALO ALTO Activity Challenge Program

This is an informational report and no Council action is required.

BACKGROUND

Working toward implementation of the Park and Recreation Commission’s goal to “encourage the citizens and employees of Palo Alto to embrace a healthier lifestyle through increased physical activity” and mindful of the City’s emission reduction goals, Community Services Department (CSD) staff created an activity challenge website accessed via www.letsgopaloalto.com and www.letsgopaloalto.org.

An activity challenge website is a motivational tool that provides interactive fun for participants who may wish to challenge themselves on an individual basis or as part of a team. The first Let’s Go PALO ALTO team challenge will begin on January 1, 2009 and the Council is invited to form a team and participate in the challenge. Teams will be able to see their group’s progress, shown as average steps per team member along a virtual challenge route as team members individually track daily activities.

An example of a team activity challenge is a virtual race from British Columbia to Panama City where teams of ten participants select a team name and captain and sign up individually. If all ten participants were to log in at least 10,000 steps per day, the team would reach Panama City within three months. Each participant logs individual activities or actual steps. A range of activities are converted variably into steps on this program so a participant entering an activity sees how many steps it converts to on the screen. The screen map shows where each team is located on the route to Panama City with a marker, so participants can check the group’s position against other teams in the race and see the total steps each team has accumulated.

The website, hosted by CoreHealth Technologies, has been set up as a non-city website as it is funded primarily by the Palo Alto Recreation Foundation, with some funding ($2,774) from Palo Alto Recreation Division’s budget. The new website is linked to websites for the Palo Alto Recreation Foundation and City of Palo Alto and is featured in the Winter Enjoy catalog. Staff
encourages the City Council to visit the website to register in the program, which includes individual challenges now underway.

**DISCUSSION**
The emphasis of the program is the combination of getting people active and keeping their interest in being active for the long term as well encouraging walking and biking to events and stores to be less reliant on vehicle trips. The site provides links to the free shuttle schedules to facilitate walking on public routes. Grocery totes and pedometers are among the “Lets Go” items available for purchase and potential prizes in prize drawings that participants will be automatically entered into at a certain number of steps.

The key feature participants will use is found by clicking on the Activity Tracker button, which leads to mapped Public Routes, My Routes and activity tracking calculators. Public Routes provide actual routes with associated mileage and steps using Google Maps software. My Routes is intended for the individual participant to create custom routes such as a daily morning, lunchtime, or evening walks, or a weekend favorite walk. The program allows participants to easily add steps and miles from their private or public routes to their overall steps travelled, and to track all types of activities per time spent in these activities, automatically converted into steps. Participants may enter steps retroactively so daily use of the site is not required.

The mapped public routes on the site include historic walks and walks among city parks, open space reserves, Stanford’s “Dish” and other local areas. Visitors to Palo Alto can use the site to find safe routes to walk from their hotels to shopping and parks, view free shuttle schedules and public open space trails. The program includes interactive challenges to get friends, coworkers and family involved and encourages participants to challenge other teams and individual participants in fun, friendly competitions. Staff and the Palo Alto Recreation Foundation are encouraging City employees, residents, community groups, those employed in the City and others to participate.

There are four types of activity challenges: team challenges, optional team challenges where groups of participants can challenge other groups, individual challenges and optional individual side challenges where individuals challenge each other. The steps traveled as entered by participants via the Activity Tracker will be automatically plotted as “virtual progress” along the mapped routes of the challenges the participant has joined. The program includes a Testimonial module allowing participants to upload photos and inspirational testimonials and a Motivation module where participants can send e-cards to friends to join the site and participate in a challenge. The Reports module allows a participant to view team history on a challenge and their 60-day individual history. Finally, a Help module provides answers and a tutorial to help people navigate the website and set up individual routes using the Google mapping software program.

Several activity challenges are now uploaded and five teams have formed to date to participate in the upcoming team challenge. The first is called “Jim’s Challenge” (as in City Manager Jim Keene) and every registered participant is automatically included in and can see their virtual individual progress along the trail. The current challenge will also encourage participants to actually go to the route and discover or rediscover the beauty of walking, running or cycling on Baylands trails. Jim’s challenge can be changed out every few months with new, actual, local
pedestrian routes mapped on the site for users to view and explore. Participants can see their own progress completing the route but are not enabled to see others’ progress.

The second challenge is called “Commission Challenge” and is a team challenge that starts in January 2009. The route approximates the San Francisco Bay Trail route. This challenge will be for teams that choose to register and will run through March 2009. The Parks and Recreation Commission started a team called the PARC-ometers, and hope that other commissions and Council form a team to compete in the team challenge. Teams of city staff members in the Community Services and Planning and Community Environment Departments have formed and motivate each other to go on group walks.

The third challenge is the “Palo Alto Community Challenge” and staff has chosen a virtual “Coast to Coast” route that will track the total steps of all registered participants to add up to a trip across the United States. All registered participants are automatically included in this community challenge and will be able to see how Palo Alto is doing as a group toward becoming a healthier community. Future challenges could borrow from other similar CoreHealth hosted websites to include a Route 66 challenge, a Fit Families challenge, and an Ocean Race from California to Hawaii requiring more than 5 million steps.

The participation levels funded to date are for 1,500 users or participants. It is estimated that by the end of the first year, approximately 2% of the City’s 63,000 residents could be participating in the program (about 1,260 people by end of 2009). With a growth rate anticipated at approximately 2% per year, there could very well be 3,780 participants enrolled by the end of the third year (2012). Case studies indicate that a majority of people who join the program will be active in the program for six months or more. Kelowna, a city of approximately 100,000 people, has a site at www.kickstartkelowna.ca. This website, also hosted by CoreHealth, has been online for 2 years, 2 months. At 2 years, 15 days old, the site had 6,789 registrants. The percentage of population using the service had grown from 1.8% after 1 year, to 3.7% in year two, to 6.2% two weeks into year three. Another activity challenge website is for British Columbia. It is a site that has been running two years with approximately 25,000 participants (about .6% of that province’s residents). Another Canadian agency, the city of New West (population 57,000), has a challenge program called New West Walks. New West was surprised to have five times the participation that had been anticipated within the first year. The “Lighten Up Louisiana” program, sponsored by the Governor’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, now has around 12,000 participants (.3% of state’s population). Several of these websites also have a weight loss challenge.

**RESOURCE IMPACT**

The website has been funded primarily by the Palo Alto Recreation Foundation, for hosting and technical support by CoreHealth Technologies for up to 1500 active participants. Additional participants will require additional annual funding at a rate of $249 per each additional set of 1,000 users. As the program is likely to grow at an undetermined rate and there is evidence that having a participant-paid user fee contributes to the continued participation, a fee is likely to be required for future program participation. At the moment, a suggested donation at joining is being employed via a Pay Pal button on the site, connected to the Palo Alto Recreation Foundation’s account.
Recreation and Golf Division staff time is involved in marketing and site administration, as staff is enabled to modify website content, including challenges and public routes, help participants, and approve teams and testimonials. Minor costs to the Palo Alto Recreation Foundation and Recreation and Golf Division budgets will include ongoing funding of the URL registration, yearly payment to the host for website maintenance and technical support, and program marketing, including publication in the City’s Enjoy catalog - the website is currently featured in the Winter Enjoy catalogue and in displays at Community Centers – and offering of prizes such as grocery totes. There are no costs involved in maintaining the Let’s Go PALO ALTO Facebook group recently begun to encourage program awareness and participation. Staff is planning additional marketing of the site including evening presentations by City management staff to Commissions and community groups, with no related costs. Staff intends to approach non-profit entities to determine their potential level(s) of support to fund increased participation and enhanced website features over time as well as create future challenges.

The following additional marketing techniques, identified by other agencies as prompting greater registration, could involve minor costs with potential revenues to offset costs:

- A Mayor’s challenge – Sponsorship on this level results in news and radio time to help capture a large audience. Large institutions like hospitals and public offices often jump, resulting in a tremendous growth spurt.
- News releases – A well developed announcement gets news and radio time.
- Corporate sponsorships – Often a good source of prizing, publicity, and members.
- Posters – Good for targeting high need areas within a community.
- Health fairs – Target people that are receptive to better living.
- Clubs and Associations – A strong inroad into huge influential populations, often results in club and workplace memberships.
- Doctor’s offices – The use of green prescriptions targets people that can most benefit from participation in wellness programs.

To date, no public agency working with the website provider has had to implement more than two or three of the techniques above to achieve their registration targets.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

The City has a long term partnership with the Palo Alto Recreation Foundation, an organization that is set up to receive donations and has provided the majority of the resources for the website. Many cities who contract with CoreHealth to run their activity challenge websites charge participant fees ranging from $10 to $25 dollars, allowing for the cost of prizes and for subsidized or waived fees for other participants such as school children. Let’s Go PALO ALTO is operating initially on a donation basis. Prizes may be offered for joining with donation to Palo Alto Recreation Foundation’s Pay Pal account over a specified amount. If no significant donations are received and as participation grows and website features are enhanced, a participation fee would likely be charged to ensure the program is ultimately a cost recovery program after the first year. However, there is interest in having a subsidized or free program for school children and teens to help establish lifelong activity habits early on. Staff intends to approach long-term recreation partner, the Palo Alto Unified School District, to set up a district-wide grade-level challenge.
Staff also plans to encourage other local nonprofits (such as Palo Alto Medical Foundation) to join the Palo Alto Recreation Foundation and City staff in this partnership effort. There is a weight loss challenge program module that can be added at some point, which could be associated with doctors’ issuance of “green prescriptions” for weight loss and exercise recommending use of the site to help with motivation.

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