

WALK Friendly Communities: Creating Vibrant, Inclusive Places for People

“Walkers are the indicator species for vibrant communities” ~ Dr. Rodney Tolley, Director, Walk21

Imagine yourself walking safely and conveniently from your home to work, shopping and entertainment. On route to these destinations on any given day you may meet neighbours walking their children to school, stop for a coffee at your favorite shop and visit with the owner, rest on a bench overlooking a garden with flowers blooming and birds singing, and enjoy the public art along the way. Not only do you arrive relaxed, the journey itself was an enjoyable experience. Life is good.

Walking is the first thing that a child wants to do and the last thing that an older person wants to give up. It is the most natural form of transportation and enables us to be independently mobile. Not so long ago walking was our primary means of transportation. This was possible because we built our cities and towns at a human scale. However, the invention, or rather intervention of the automobile changed the way that we design and plan our physical environment, and we are only beginning to understand the repercussions of a car-centric world.

Creating walk friendly communities and encouraging people to walk more often can lead to improved health outcomes, revitalize local economies, foster social connections, and contribute to safer and more sustainable cities and towns. One of the best things about walking is that you don't need any fancy or high priced equipment to do it. You just put on a comfortable pair of shoes, open your door and enjoy the trip.

Rates of obesity and overweight are rising¹, and chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease and hypertension are a leading cause of death and disability². At the same time, physical activity levels of Canadians are at an all-time low; 91% of Canadian children and youth and 51% of Canadian adults are not getting the recommended levels of daily physical activity³. In 2007, the Ontario Professional Planners Institute issued a position paper, *Healthy Communities, Sustainable Communities* that recognizes the relationship between land use planning (and the resulting built environment) and health.⁴

On the positive side, a growing body of evidence suggests that walk friendly environments encourage people to walk. A 2009 study by the British Columbia Parks and Recreation Association that focused on Metro Vancouver found that adults are 2.5

¹ Statistics Canada, (2010), *Canadian Community Health Survey*.

² Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, (2007), *Preventing and Managing Chronic Disease: Ontario's Framework*.

³ Heart and Stroke Foundation, (2011).

⁴ OPPI, (2007). *Healthy Communities, Sustainable Communities*.

times more likely to walk when they live in well-connected neighbourhoods with features that are walk friendly. Furthermore, the study indicated that adults who live in walk friendly neighbourhoods drive 58% less on average than those who don't and that people in areas well-served by transit generally do more walking⁵.

Furthermore, the Canadian Institute of Planner's Healthy Communities Planning Guide states that walk friendly neighbourhoods are associated with more active travel behavior, and pedestrian-friendly streetscapes encourage physical activity. In addition, they are associated with lower body weights, fewer traffic accidents and less crime⁶.

And there is more good news! Walk friendly neighbourhoods are desirable places to live, work, play and do business. A 2012 study by Toronto Public Health revealed an overwhelming preference for walk friendly and transit-supportive neighbourhoods across the Greater Toronto Area. Results of the study demonstrate that specific neighbourhood features such as having shops, food stores and services within walking distance of homes are strongly desired by Toronto residents. It also found that there is a strong latent demand for more walk friendly neighbourhood features among residents who currently live in less walkable areas⁷.

There is tremendous opportunity for municipalities and developers to meet this latent demand. According to a national transportation survey, 84% of Canadians agreed that they would like to walk more often, while 54% of respondents live within reasonable walking distance (2.5 km) of at least one routine destination⁸. The same study found that 56% of Canadians felt that governments should spend more money to provide continuous routes of well-maintained sidewalks, paths and trails to get from place to place.

More and more research also shows that creating walk friendly communities is a sound investment that's good for business. A recently released report commissioned by the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce explains how pedestrian and transit-oriented environments attract creative jobs in the city. The study found that almost half of the creative industries in Hamilton are clustered in neighbourhoods in and around the downtown core, which correlate to high Walk Scores⁹. The study is being used to inform local efforts at job creation and goes on to say that "walkable environments should be

⁵ BCRPA, (2009). *Physical Activity and Transportation Benefits of Walkable Approaches to Community Design in British Columbia*.

⁶ CIP, (2010). *Healthy Communities Practice Guide*.

⁷ Toronto Public Health, (2012). *The Walkable City: Neighbourhood Design and Preferences, Travel Choices and Health*.

⁸ Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute, (2004). *2004 National Transportation Survey*.

⁹ <http://www.walkscore.com/>

viewed as economic infrastructure that attract employment and should be invested in accordingly¹⁰.”

In addition, safe, convenient and enjoyable walking conditions allow people to save on vehicle expenses. For example, a report by the Victoria Transport Policy Institute, *The Economic Value of Walkability*, found that households in automobile-dependent communities devote 50% more of their income to transportation than households in communities with more accessible land use and multi-modal transportation systems¹¹. The less people drive, the more disposable income they have to spend in local economies.

So, what does a walk friendly community look like? Assessing how walk friendly a community is involves a comprehensive review of plans and policies; engineering and community design; education and encouragement activities; enforcement initiatives and the evaluation of progress over time.

Planning for walking happens at many different levels, ranging from pedestrian plans, community improvement plans, and official plans to regional and provincial plans and policies. A comprehensive plan for walking addresses all five Es as outlined above. Engaging citizens in identifying issues and creating a vision for a walk friendly community is vital to the planning process. With thorough and on-going planning, as well as a supportive policy environment a community can become proactive rather than reactive in addressing issues such as accessibility, safety, connectivity and attractiveness.

Engineering involves designing, operating, and maintaining quality walking facilities and is a critical element in producing a walk friendly community. Designers and engineers play a critical role in creating safer, inviting, and more accessible streetscape for walking, and these benefits aren't limited to walkers. By accommodating walkers in all designs for the public right of way, they become safer for all users. It is essential that pedestrian engineering and design tools are used throughout communities, including sidewalk accommodations and standards, crossings and intersections, traffic calming, and new and innovative treatments.

Education programs and activities are primary components in creating a successful walk friendly community because they inform, inspire, motivate and reward walkers and other users of the public right of way. Effective pedestrian safety education begins at an early age, is age-specific, and continues through the years across all modes. For example, motorists that are educated about pedestrian safety contribute to a safer, more pleasant walking environment for people.

¹⁰ Centre for Community Study, (2012). *Walkability and Economic Development*. Hamilton Chamber of Commerce.

¹¹ Litman, Todd, (2004). *The Economic Value of Walkability*. Victoria Transport Policy Institute.

Encouragement programs such as Active and Safe Routes to School and walking clubs can be fun and inclusive. Events that “open streets” to people using active modes of transportation not only provide an opportunity to bring people together and celebrate as a community, but can also be good for local businesses.

Enforcement is an important technique for making communities safer for walking. Although the walking environment may include engineering improvements or urban design features, there may still be safety concerns if traffic laws are not properly understood or adequately enforced. A well-implemented enforcement campaign may include public education campaigns, law enforcement officer training and ticketing strategies.

Evaluation of the physical walking environment and behavior plays a crucial role in problem identification and countermeasure selection. However, on-going evaluation of plans, programs and practices that support and improve conditions for walking is equally important. In order to truly understand the needs and safety issues of walkers, evaluation needs to happen formally and informally on an on-going basis.

Green Communities Canada, through its Canada Walks division, seeks to make communities more WALK friendly. In 2010, Canada Walks recognized communities for their efforts to create a culture of walking in Ontario through the first ever Ontario Walkability Award of Excellence. Applications were reviewed by a panel of experts in the field of active transportation and award winners were Brantford (urban), Aldershot (suburban) and Haliburton/Minden (rural).

Building on the momentum created by the pilot, Canada Walks is now developing WALK Friendly Ontario (WFO), a recognition program that encourages municipalities to create and improve spaces and places to walk by awarding bronze, silver, gold, or platinum designations. To participate, municipalities will complete an assessment that measures progress on a range of factors including planning and the 5 Es as previously discussed. Canada Walks will pilot the assessment tool with 4 communities across the province this fall, with the first intake of applications scheduled for 2013. With sufficient sponsorship, the vision is for a national WALK Friendly program in 2014.

WFO is modeled after the Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Centre’s Walk Friendly Communities program in the U.S. Since its inception in 2010, Walk Friendly Communities has awarded 1 platinum, 9 gold, 5 silver and 9 bronze designations to cities and towns across the United States (www.walkfriendly.org).

Some of the benefits to municipalities to becoming involved in the WALK Friendly Ontario program are:

- Access to information and resources available through the website to help you make improvements,
- Benchmarking your city or town's walkability enables you to set targets and measure progress overtime,
- Opportunities to learn from other communities through case studies of award winners,
- Marketing your community as walk friendly – using your award designation in attraction and retention strategies, and
- Comprehensive assessment allows you to document all of your walking-related initiatives in one place.

It takes a community to be walk friendly. Because there are multiple benefits to getting more people walking, there are many opportunities for collaboration. Potential partners include: Municipal councils and staff (recreation, transportation, planning, public works, economic development, by-law enforcement), public health professionals, law enforcement, schools, business improvement associations, chambers of commerce, community and environmental groups, and others.

Finally, communities that are walk friendly are inclusive, welcoming and accessible to all regardless of age, income level, or physical ability. This is important to the more than 30% of Canadians that do not drive, and more and more relevant as our population ages. Furthermore, shifting car trips to active transportation trips also contributes to a more sustainable community, less congestion and improved air quality.

Although applications for the Ontario awards will not be open until 2013, there are many things that communities across the country can do now to become more walk friendly:

- Check out the resources section of our website at www.walkfriendly.ca,
- Read the case studies of the winners in the U.S. found on their website,
- Begin to assemble your team that will collaborate on the application,
- Review high level plans to see where and how walking is referenced, and
- Look for ways that you can make improvements before the 1st intake.

In the meantime, go for a walk!

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