

Canada Walks Launches WALK Friendly Ontario

Starting in 2013, Ontario municipalities will be eligible for a new Walk Friendly Ontario (WFO) designation. Designations will be awarded to applicants at the bronze, silver, gold, and platinum levels.

The designations are part of a new initiative, Walk Friendly Ontario, which encourages and celebrates communities that take steps to make walking safe, convenient and attractive.

Walk Friendly Ontario is a program of Canada Walks, a department of Green Communities Canada.

Interested communities are invited to a free webinar May 23 to introduce Walk Friendly Ontario and one of its valuable tools, the iCANwalk checklist. (See http://walkfriendly.ca/?page_id=28 for details.)

Benefits of walkability

Initial response to the designation is enthusiastic. Municipalities increasingly realize that walkable communities are desirable places to live, work, play and do business.

According to a recent study by Toronto Public Health, *The Walkable City*, residents across the GTHA overwhelmingly prefer walk friendly neighbourhoods.ⁱ “And we have found the same preference in our recent work with communities in every region of Ontario,” adds Mandy Johnson, a consultant on the WFO project.

A new study released by the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce shows that business is also making the connection. The report concludes: “Walkable environments should be considered economic infrastructure.”ⁱⁱ

Walk friendly communities are inclusive, welcoming and accessible to all regardless of age, income level, or physical ability. This is important to the more than 30% of Ontarians that do not drive.

Substituting the everyday short trips we make by automobile with walking trips can also reduce our carbon footprint and improve air quality, contributing to municipal sustainability goals.

Planning for walk friendly communities

There are a number of land use components that influence walkabilityⁱⁱⁱ including:

- Layout, design and maintenance of sidewalks, paths and trails;
- A mix of land uses that include a combination of homes, stores, businesses, institutions, community and cultural facilities and industries;
- Connected networks of non-motorized transport systems that allow people to access many services and destinations without driving;
- Safe, comfortable and attractive streets, public spaces, buildings and structures.

Creating communities that are well connected with quality infrastructure and amenities requires strong land use planning policies that shape the built environment in ways that support walking. For example site plan control requirements can help to create communities that are aesthetically pleasing, with amenities that make walking enjoyable, such as seating and shade, gathering places like plazas or parkettes, attractive building facades, and landscaping.

These elements encourage people to not only travel through an area, but linger, and stroll, sit, relax, enjoy, and of course, shop, eat and spend money. The pleasant and joyful experience of walking is also key to developing a sense of place – a deep sense of connection and belonging in the community.

Recognition for municipalities

“Walking is the most natural form of transportation and we sometimes take it for granted,” says project manager Kate Hall. “WALK Friendly Ontario is a way for us to recognize municipalities for their efforts to create more walk friendly spaces and places.”

Through its past work, Canada Walks has learned about the great work municipalities are doing to make walking a priority, often spread across several departments. Participating in WALK Friendly Ontario will help municipalities to document all walking-related programs, projects, and policies in one place, creating a comprehensive resource for staff.

To receive a designation, communities will complete an assessment that measures progress across a range of factors. The process is similar to the Bicycle Friendly Communities program initiated by our partner organization, Share the Road Cycling Coalition. Our website, www.walkfriendly.ca, offers a wealth of resources to help prepare. There is ample time to gather a team of stakeholders and plan for improvements prior to the first intake of applications in 2013.

For inspiration, see Seattle, which received a platinum designation from the US walk friendly program (www.walkfriendly.org/communities/community.cfm?ID=53). We've all got a lot of work to do to take it the next level!

WALK Friendly Ontario is an initiative of Canada Walks (www.canadawalks.ca), a department of Green Communities Canada (www.greencommunitiescanada.ca), and is supported by a grant from the Ontario Government.

i The Walkable City, Toronto Public Health, April 2012

https://www.google.ca/search?rlz=1C1GGGE_enCA409&aq=0&oq=the+walkable+&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8&q=the+walkable+city+toronto

ii Walkability & Economic Development: How Pedestrian & Transit Oriented Developments Attract Creative Jobs in Hamilton, Hamilton Chamber of Commerce, May 2012

http://www.hamiltonchamber.ca/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&gid=986&Itemid=96

iii Planning By Design: a healthy communities handbook, 2009. Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing and the Ontario Professional Planners Institute.

http://www.ontarioplanners.on.ca/pdf/Healthy_Communities_Handbook.pdf