



Healthy Communities and Planning for a Sustainable Greater Toronto Area A Call to Action from the Ontario Professional Planners Institute March 25, 2011

Overview

To achieve healthy communities and a sustainable city region there needs to be a balance between nature and human development. A truly functional, sustainable, livable and healthy city region integrates and complements the natural environment. This reduces the environmental impact while also helping to promote physical activity, psychological well-being and healthier outcomes for all community members.

Background

In 2009, the Ontario Professional Planners Institute (OPPI) and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing jointly released the report *Planning by Design: a healthy communities handbook*. The report shares and generates ideas on how places can be planned and designed more sustainably for healthy, active living and to retain and attract residents, investors and visitors. The report has been well-received by planners, stakeholders and the public. *Copies can be downloaded at:* <http://www.ontarioplanners.on.ca/content/Publications/innovativepolicypapers.aspx>

Positioning

To achieve a healthy and livable city region, the following must be priorities:

Urbanizing Suburbia (*land use, transportation and urban form*)

A large percentage of the Greater Toronto Area's built environment was constructed after the Second World War. Most of this development is suburban, car-oriented, uninviting to pedestrians, wasteful of energy and generates large amounts of greenhouse gases. What's more, its densities and forms can barely support transit or active transportation. Some sources indicate that this type of development represents 80 percent of the built environment.

Some major areas of work include:

- strengthening existing and new urban centres;
- converting car-oriented malls and strip retail into transit-supportive centres and corridors;
- promoting infill and intensification in underused and brownfield sites;
- retrofitting, where appropriate, existing commercial, employment and residential areas to increase densities, introduce a mix of uses, improve walkability and provide viable transit;
- and, where it is to occur, encouraging sustainable cluster development and healthy urban extensions.

As infrastructure is renewed and repaired, care must be taken to recycle and reuse construction material.

Although some new developments are incorporating green development initiatives, this alone cannot significantly address issues such as climate change, peak oil and public health. Urbanizing suburban built forms and making them more sustainable should be a key priority in all city regions in Ontario.

Levelling the Playfield (economics and process)

The province's Greenbelt Plan and Growth Plan have had a positive effect on development within the Greater Golden Horseshoe. Nevertheless, significant challenges exist. These include:

- limited suitable development types;
- outdated, car-oriented, suburban standards;
- limited investment in transit and active transportation from senior levels of government;
- cost of land;
- public opposition;
- and approval processes.

A true restoration economy will: include restoring nature and habitat as well as structures and heritage; revolve around retrofit and incremental growth instead of sprawl; and be based on local existing resources and social balance.

One of the key issues is support from all levels of government and agencies, including decisions to invest in and optimize the use of infrastructure, including hospitals, universities and colleges, schools, roads, transit, piped services and energy systems.

Integrated Movement (walking, biking, transit, trucking and automobiles)

In Canada, changing demographics have had a profound effect on household composition. Yet the post-war dream of a suburban house with a two-car garage remains at the core of the current development system in the region.

The lifestyle associated with suburbia – particularly the necessity to drive everywhere because homes, jobs, shopping and other amenities are sprawled over vast distances – consumes significant resources and has a huge impact on the environment. It also creates serious health problems and is endangering our future. The real costs associated with traditional suburban development are simply not sustainable.

All critical modes of transportation need to be accommodated. Yet when it comes to transportation planning, the motor vehicle still dominates. This is beginning to change as more viable alternatives to the automobile become more mainstream. Reducing dependency on personal vehicles requires an integrated approach that examines transportation from door to door. The degree to which residents can move easily and economically from A to B is key.

Active transportation includes any human-powered mode or method of travel such as walking, cycling or in-line skating. This reduces road congestion which is environmentally friendly, economical and contributes to healthy living. If, for instance, the average commuter walked to transit for 10 minutes and then traveled for 45 minutes, their commute would be comparable to current driving times - plus they would get 30 minutes of exercise each work day. In a society that needs to address obesity and other lifestyle-related health issues, active transportation is one means of promoting physical activity.

The built form of neighbourhoods along with the scale and design of sidewalks and roads and how these are managed for various uses has a considerable impact on the pedestrian environment. People will not walk unless the experience is positive. Currently, however, providing for pedestrian access and mobility is often an afterthought.

Enhancing the Appeal of Urban Living (marketing, outreach and communication)

Making urban living attractive and desirable with all that represents – a reliance on transit and active transportation, a full range and mix of uses in close proximity to each other, appropriate public amenities and space - has many challenges if communities are to reduce the impact on the environment. It is also a prerequisite for reducing and stopping sprawl; saving, protecting and restoring natural areas; protecting agricultural lands; and for increasingly sustainable, healthy and livable city regions.

Throughout Ontario there is an explosion of activity connected to urban agriculture and a growing interest in access to healthy and local food. The role of planners in planning for food has never been more important. There are many opportunities to integrate urban design and food production. There is also the need to ensure access to fresh food in all urban areas through planning and incentives to retain supermarkets and encourage farmers' markets. Addressing these challenges and opportunities will be key in making our urban environments desirable places to live.

Our Position

OPPI calls upon planners, public decision making bodies and the private sector to make healthy community planning a priority. Agencies have access to numerous tools that can be adapted to support strong, livable and healthy communities that enhance social well being and are economically sound. These tools need to be better utilized and in more creative and innovative ways.

Established in 1986, OPPI is the recognized voice of the province's planning profession and provides vision and leadership on key planning issues. The Institute's more than 3,000 members work in government, private practice, universities, and non-profit agencies in the fields of urban and rural development, urban design, environmental planning, transportation, health and social services, heritage conservation, housing, and economic development.

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For additional copies of this Call to Action or further information on OPPI's Healthy Communities initiative, please go to:

<http://www.ontarioplanners.on.ca/content/Publications/innovativepolicypapers.aspx>

For more information on The Living City Report Card, please go to:

www.thelivingcity.org

For more information on Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, please go to: www.trca.on.ca