

HOLD FOR RELEASE: April 7, 2009



BC Fitness Levels Linked to Neighbourhood Design, Studies Find

Vancouver—New Canadian research reveals that BC residents who live in neighbourhoods where it's easy to walk to schools, shopping, work and play tend to be significantly healthier, and less likely to be overweight, obese or suffer from high blood pressure. The findings are being released today in two separate studies by Smart Growth BC and the Active Transportation Collaboratory at UBC. The Vancouver Foundation was the lead funding agency for both projects.

The studies build on previous research showing that adults who walk at least 30 minutes a day, five days a week can reap significant health benefits. The walking does not have to be continuous "exercise." It can include short walks for daily activities, such as trips to buy groceries, go to school, or visit friends.

Yet, most Canadians do not meet these minimum levels of activity. Lack of physical exercise has been associated with higher risk of chronic illness—a condition whose spiraling incidence is increasing Canada's medical costs faster than the economy grows, and straining our public health care system.

Why don't most people walk? To what extent do the neighbourhoods they live in discourage them from walking? What are the characteristics of neighbourhoods that make walking enjoyable or difficult?

In one of the studies, University of British Columbia researchers Brian Patterson and Meghan Winters, led by Bombardier Chair Dr. Larry Frank, found that people in Greater Vancouver or Greater Victoria who live in neighbourhoods with a grocery store within walking distance are nearly 50% more likely to get sufficient physical activity than residents of communities who have to drive to shop. The study was conducted in partnership with Cora M. Craig of the Canadian Lifestyle and Fitness Research Institute.

Even the design of shopping districts is associated with the likelihood that people will be overweight, Dr. Frank's team found. People in neighbourhoods with traditional shopping streets that are lined with shops near the sidewalk are half as likely to be overweight than people who must drive to shopping centres where stores are set behind vast parking lots.

The second study, by Dr. Ray Tomalty and Dr. Murtaza Haider, scored how walkable were 16 urban and rural neighbourhoods from throughout BC, and compared them to physical activity and health data from the latest Provincial Health Services Authority's "Health and Wellness Survey." Their findings corroborate Dr. Frank's, and suggest that the observations made by Dr. Frank and his team are likely to extend to communities throughout BC.

Dr. Tomalty and Dr. Haider created a "walkability index," designed to quantify how a neighbourhood's design makes walking a pleasant and convenient daily activity. Neighbourhoods scored high when they offered a variety of shopping, jobs and facilities such as schools and recreation centres near homes, as well as continuous sidewalks, well-connected

walkways, human-scale streets, and nearby access to parks and green spaces. The study found a significant association between these walk-friendly neighbourhoods and the likelihood of their residents to walk, have lower average weight and fewer chronic diseases.

To help local governments create healthier neighbourhoods, Smart Growth BC also published a guide with 116 policies and programs local officials can adopt to promote healthy living. *“The same basic smart growth principles that provide environmental, energy and economic benefits can also advance health goals,”* said Smart Growth BC’s Executive Director, Cam Brewer. *“This new guide goes beyond walkability to encompass a wide range of land use strategies that create communities where residents of all ages, abilities and income levels can connect with others in their neighbourhood, find housing options for different stages of their life, breathe cleaner air, make healthy eating choices, and more.”*

“Promoting healthy living through education and social marketing is a key priority,” said Bobbe Wood, President & CEO of the Heart and Stroke Foundation of BC & Yukon. *“However, this vital work is often undermined by physical environments that make healthy choices difficult. We need to encourage land-use planners and local governments to design communities that make healthy choices easy choices. This will be a key tactic in the overall strategy of reversing Canada’s alarming chronic disease burden.”*

The new Smart Growth BC guide, *“Creating Healthy Communities: Tools and Actions to Foster Environments for Healthy Living,”* was presented last week to the Health Officers Council, an organization representing Medical Health Officers in British Columbia. Provincial Health Officer, Dr. Perry Kendall wrote,

“Creating healthier built environments is a vitally important population health promotion strategy that requires the active involvement of the design professions, health professionals, municipal and other levels of government and the private sector. This guide can help them create those healthier built environments and can thus make an important contribution to a healthier BC.”

Where would the money come from? One potential source is the federal government’s recently-launched *“Building Canada Plan,”* which commits \$33 billion in funding for infrastructure projects, including initiatives that improve the health and safety of families and make communities more livable with public transit, brownfield remediation, local roads, sport and cultural facilities.

Smart Growth BC is the leading non-governmental organization working towards creating more livable communities in British Columbia. www.smartgrowth.bc.ca

The UBC Active Transportation Collaboratory is a research unit devoted to assessing and to conveying how community design impacts: travel, time use, and activity patterns; air quality; climate change; energy consumption; and public health. www.act-trans.ubc.ca

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