

2009 BC Sprawl Report

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Walkability and Health

Case Studies Summary

A study by:

*Dr. Ray Tomalty, and
Dr. Murtaza Haider*

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*The R. Howard Webster Foundation
and The Vancouver Foundation*

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Why is this study relevant?

A number of studies have shown that people who live in more walkable neighbourhoods make more trips on foot or by bicycle, spend less time driving, and are more likely to meet recommended levels of physical activity than people living in less walkable environments.ⁱ

What methodology was used?

Dr. Tomalty interviewed planning staff in three BC local governments, namely Vancouver, Port Moody and the District of Invermere, and analyzed their policies, published statistics and related documents to develop case studies. These case studies shed light on local efforts to promote walking and cycling, as well as their strengths and areas needing improvement.

A recent study showed that for every 5% improvement in the walkability of a neighbourhood (increased density, street connectivity, land use mix and retail floor area), adults who live there tend to walk and cycle 32% more, have a lower Body Mass Index and enjoy reduced pollution from automobiles.ⁱⁱ

The City of Vancouver was the first municipality in BC to accept the provincial government's "20 by 2010 Challenge" (to increase levels of physical activity in the province 20% by 2010), launching the Active Communities Vancouver program in 2006.

The total area of parks and green spaces is 1,028 hectares, or 40% of Port Moody's total landmass – the highest share in Metro Vancouver.

What were key findings?

City of Vancouver Case Study

Evidence of progress

- The City experienced successful redevelopment downtown and in surrounding areas, achieving high densities and considerable mix of uses.
- Despite significant residential and employment growth, the City achieved a 7% decrease in automobile trips to downtown between 1993 and 2004, with mode share shifting towards transit and active modes.
- Around 30% of trips to and within downtown are made by walking, exceeding the 1997 Transportation Plan's target mode share of 18% for walking and cycling combined.
- Between 1993 and 2002, Vancouver-registered passenger vehicles decreased their average travel distance by 30%.
- The City achieved mixed-use, high-density development around certain SkyTrain stations.
- In 2004, the City enacted a secondary suites by-law.
- Neighbourhoods across the City have carried out a large number of traffic calming and sidewalk improvement projects; almost 95% of all Vancouver streets now have sidewalks, and a large number of push-button pedestrian crossings have been installed.

Where work is needed

- Outside of the downtown core, the City has made limited progress on intensification.
- Despite numerous traffic calming and pedestrian improvement projects, the urban form in low density areas remains largely automobile-oriented.
- Vancouver has still not achieved its policy goal of creating a "city of neighbourhoods." Through participative community planning, the City identified 19 "Neighbourhood Centres." Of these, only two are beginning to be implemented; the remaining 17 have yet to be planned.
- The planned greenway system is only roughly one-third complete.
- The 1997 Transportation Plan's benchmarks for mode share of walking and cycling to be achieved by 2021 are too modest, having already been surpassed for the most part.

City of Port Moody Case Study

Evidence of progress

- The City achieved high-density, mixed use development at Inlet Centre.



Virtually all of the built-up area in the District of Invermere falls within a 1.5-km radius of the downtown commercial strip on 7th Avenue — a compact community.

- The majority of new development is multi-family.
- The City's development permit guidelines include strong directives for the design of pedestrian facilities and street fronts.
- Since 2004, the City has allowed secondary suites in certain areas.
- The City planned and built pedestrian and cyclist connections across the CP railway, and has executed numerous traffic calming projects.
- There is increasing pedestrian activity in Moody Centre.

Where work is needed

- The City's mode share of walking and cycling is below the regional average.
- The role of active transportation is not clearly defined in the City's planning documents. For example, no specific goals have been set in terms of mode share of walking and cycling.
- The City has made little progress on the Official Community Plan's goal of creating "village-like" environments in existing neighbourhoods.
- The City has no policies encouraging the location of public facilities to maximize pedestrian and cycling access, nor does it have a program promoting bicycle use for trips to work.
- The City lacks a local greenways plan and connections to the regional greenways network.

District of Invermere Case Study

Evidence of progress

- The District recognizes smart growth and active transportation as important issues.
- The District has built new pedestrian and cyclist facilities using private and public resources.
- The District's municipal policies address the challenges and opportunities of more compact and walkable development.
- The District's Official Community Plan emphasizes the role of a pedestrian-friendly downtown, including residential and mixed-use infill development.
- The District is seeing increased density and dwelling-type diversity.
- The District allows secondary suites.

Where work is needed

- The District demonstrates limited policy development and follow-through, as well as limited data collection and use of quantitative indicators.
- In recent years, a series of urgent water-supply issues have consumed most of the District's financial and administrative resources.

- The “second-home boom” is increasing traffic and resulting in new and reconfigured roadways, which may pose challenges to pedestrians and cyclists.
- The District’s key policies on site planning and urban form are limited to downtown, thereby creating a need for more general growth and planning controls.
- The District’s parkland and park/greenways planning efforts are lagging behind its goals.



What are the most significant policy implications?

The local governments involved in this study are showing increasing commitment to promoting an environment that is conducive to walking and biking. Local authorities are taking steps to improve pedestrian and bike facilities, calm traffic on pedestrian corridors, and afford more attention to the attractiveness and walkability of streetscapes, including street fronts, sidewalks and landscaping.

Moreover, smart growth policies are being increasingly adopted to guide municipal planning and development decisions. Intensification is proceeding, especially through minimally disruptive strategies such as secondary suites legalization and increased multifamily development in new communities. There is also evidence of a move towards an increased mix of land uses in strategic locations, such as around transit stations and in central areas.

However, the case studies reveal the need for more work. Not all municipalities have included specific goals, e.g. modal shares, to promote active transportation. Some municipalities lack measures to gauge the effectiveness of interventions related to facilitating active transportation. There is also a need to ensure that all municipalities have developed comprehensive active transportation plans, including capital investments, programs and targets.

There is also need to develop specific land use objectives and monitoring frameworks that would facilitate progress towards smart growth goals. The reshaping of existing neighbourhoods to be more pedestrian-friendly has been slow to materialize. While streetscapes are being increasingly attended to, regulations on maximum setbacks and orderly street fronts are still not universal.

ⁱ Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada’s website: http://www.heartandstroke.com/site/c.ikiQLcMWJtE/b.3483953/k.7D68/Basic_principles_of_physical_activity.htm

ⁱⁱ Lawrence D. Frank et al. (2006). “Many Pathways from Land Use to Health: Associations between Neighbourhood Walkability and Active Transportation, Body Mass Index, and Air Quality.” *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Volume 72, Issue 1, p. 75-87.

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