



MEDIA RELEASE



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Announcing Ontario Communities walkON!

Today, Green Communities Canada, Walk and Bike for Life and walkON are launching **Ontario Communities walkON**, a program that will, over the next three years, help make 24 Ontario cities and towns more walkable. A walkable community allows people to choose to walk to local destinations, rather than take the car.

Ontario Communities walkON is based on the success of walkON, six community partnerships of the Ontario Heart Health Program who collaborate to engage and support their communities to create environments that support walking (www.walkon.ca). walkON works in partnership with politicians, planners, engineers, and citizens from 17 community groups, using comprehensive, easy-to-use resources and tools designed to educate, empower and inspire community members.

Brantford is one of the communities currently involved in walkON. Brantford's Mayor Hancock states: "I am in complete support of the Ontario Communities walkON program. A walkable community is more sociable, less polluted, more relaxed, a healthier and more pleasant place to live. Building a walkable community will encourage more people to make their lives richer through walking."

Jacky Kennedy, Director of Walking Programs for Green Communities Canada, believes **Ontario Communities walkON** will be the catalyst for a much-needed shift in transportation thinking across the province. "When given priority in community plans, walking can play a significant role in meeting local transportation demand management goals, by shifting motorized trips to active travel," says Kennedy. "The implications for reducing traffic congestion are huge and so are the associated benefits: boosting local economies, improving human health through daily physical activity, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions and other air pollutants."

Ontario Communities walkON is generously supported by a three-year, \$248,500 grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation (www.trilliumfoundation.org). The Foundation is an agency of the Government of Ontario and works to help build healthy and vibrant communities by strengthening the capacity of the voluntary sector through investments in community-based initiatives.

Green Communities Canada (www.gca.ca) is a national association of non-profit organizations that deliver innovative, practical environmental solutions to Canadian households and communities. In 2007, the organization launched a *Walkolution*, with the coordination of the successful World Record Walk event (www.worldrecordwalk.ca) and co-hosting the Walk21 Toronto 2007 conference with the City of Toronto (www.toronto.ca/walk21).

Walk & Bike for Life (www.walkandbikeforlife.org) is a Canadian based non-profit organization with an international outlook. The organization is dedicated to promoting walking and bicycling as activities and urban parks and trails as great public spaces. The goal of Walk and Bike for Life is to contribute to the creation of vibrant cities and healthy communities where there are great places that can be enjoyed by all.

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Ontario Communities walkON Media Backgrounder

What are Walkable Communities?

Walkable communities are healthy, vibrant communities, where citizens rely less on their cars and choose walking more often as a form of everyday transportation.

Walkable communities encourage walking by making it safe, convenient, and attractive to do so, which is important for many reasons:

- Health – Regular, daily walking reduces health risks such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease (<http://www.active2010.ca/Documents/active2010-strategy-e.pdf>); (http://www.heartandstroke.com/site/c.iklQLcMWJtE/b.3820627/k.DB5D/The_built_environment_physical_activity_heart_disease_and_stroke.htm); "Walking is the nearest activity to perfect exercise" - Professor J. Morris and Dr. Adrienne Hardman, 1997 (<http://www.ramblers.org.uk/info/factsandfigures/health.htm>)
- Environment – Replacing short car trips with walking can improve local air quality and can reduce greenhouse gas emissions, helping Ontarians meet climate change objectives. A short trip on foot to school by 9 families participating in a 'walking school bus' can reduce greenhouse gases by 1,000 kg over one year (<http://www.saferoutestoschool.ca/>)
- Traffic – More people walking means less congestion on roads, reduced requirements for road infrastructure and maintenance, and more awareness of pedestrians by drivers thereby increasing pedestrian safety (http://www.railstotrails.org/resources/documents/whatwedo/atfa/ATFA_20081020.pdf)
- Community cohesion – More people walking encourages even more people to walk, increasing social interaction, lessening crime and vandalism due to more eyes on the streets, heightening the sense of community belonging, pride, and spirit (Leyden, K. Social Capital and the Built Environment: The Importance of Walkable Neighbourhoods, American Journal of Public Health 2003; 93: 1546 -51).
- Economy – When a population shift to walking occurs, health care costs are reduced as a result of the health benefits of walking; when business districts cater to walkers instead of drivers their prosperity increases; highly walkable districts are magnets for tourism (Go for Green, The Business Case for Active Transportation, March 2004)
- Fuel savings – Individuals save money by using their cars less, and demand for a dwindling supply of oil is lessened. (http://www.railstotrails.org/resources/documents/whatwedo/atfa/ATFA_20081020.pdf)

The Development of walkON

walkON (www.walkon.ca) was developed by staff from six Ontario Heart Health: Taking Action for Health Living Projects and health units from Niagara Region, Haldimand-Norfolk, Brant County, Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph, Halton Region, and the Region of Waterloo.

Working in partnership with politicians, planners, engineers, and citizens from 17 community groups, walkON has created comprehensive, easy-to-use resources and tools designed to educate, empower and inspire community members.

Examples of Walkable Community initiatives supported by walkON to date

- The highly visible “Blue Bridge” pedestrian bridge crossing highway 403 in Brantford (<http://www.healthylivingbrant.com/node/186>);
- An innovative School Travel Planning pilot (<http://www.saferoutestoschool.ca/schooltravel.asp>) and a Walkability Working Group in the Region of Waterloo ([http://www.region.waterloo.on.ca/web/health.nsf/0/3304018ABBFE6FB58525717F00640305/\\$file/Walkability_Report.pdf?openelement](http://www.region.waterloo.on.ca/web/health.nsf/0/3304018ABBFE6FB58525717F00640305/$file/Walkability_Report.pdf?openelement))
- The creation of beautiful murals along a previously depressing section of trail in Thorold (<http://thoroldmurals.com/Home.html>)
- Dufferin County Council has shown real leadership in taking responsibility for the creation of a Regional Trails/Active Transportation Master Plan and is partnering with Headwaters Communities in Action (a grass-roots citizen group who have championed trails)

We Have a Long Way to Go

Across Canada, only about 12% of trips to the grocery store, work, the library or school are made on foot or by bicycle. While this is higher than the 7% rate in the United States, it is much lower than in the Netherlands (46%) and Denmark (41%) (Pucher J, Dijkstra L. Promoting safe walking and cycling to improve public health: lessons from the Netherlands and Germany. *American Journal of Public Health* 2003; 93(9):1509-1516).