



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.

Why are Walkable Communities Important?

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_activiy_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).
- Age friendly community - The Ontario population is aging. The population of seniors is expected to double in the next 16 years (<http://www.lhins.on.ca/page.aspx?id=880>). As most seniors desire to age at home, walkable communities are vital to ensure seniors can access essential services and stay socially connected. Many of the features that make a community walkable are essential elements on the World Health Organization's Checklist of Essential Features for Age Friendly Communities (http://www.who.int/ageing/publications/Age_friendly_cities_checklist.pdf)
- 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 (Cars don't shop, people do!); 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)
- Mental health - Communities that are designed to be walkable will have residents who are more likely to know their neighbours, to participate politically, to trust others and be involved socially, which can lead to better physical and mental health (CFLRI, Making the Case for Active Transportation, Bulletin 7, Social Capital, 2009). Walking to school and other outdoor experiences can offset some of the most disturbing childhood trends which in addition to obesity, include attention disorders, and depression (<http://richardlouv.com/last-child-excerpt>).
- Happiness - Canadian sustainable transportation expert, Dr. Catherine O'Brien is working on leading-edge research that indicates sustainable transportation alternatives, like walking, promotes emotional well-being and independence in children and joy and happiness in all populations. Experiencing joy and happiness can have a tremendous positive impact on mental health (<http://www.bikewalk.org/pdfs/forumarch1006footprint.pdf>).

Ontario Communities walkON is a collaborative partnership of Green Communities Canada, walkON and Walk and Bike for Life (http://www.canadawalks.ca/project_walkon.asp), with support from the Ontario Trillium Foundation¹.

Green Communities Canada

Green Communities Canada (GCC) is a national association of non-profit organizations that deliver innovative, practical environmental solutions to Canadian households and communities (www.greencommunitiescanada.org). Canada Walks is a division of GCC with a mission of changing the current paradigm such that walkable communities become the cultural and social norm across Canada.

Walk and Bike for Life

Walk and Bike for Life (www.walkandbikeforlife.org) is an Ontario-based non-profit organization with an international outlook. The organization promotes walking and bicycling as activities and urban parks, trails and other public spaces as great places for all. Walk and Bike for Life works at the community level to engage diverse stakeholders in issues relating to active mobility and public spaces. Walk and Bike for Life's community-led action plans have been successful in providing 20 communities across Ontario with the tools to advocate for safe, accessible infrastructure and programming that encourage people to walk, bike and enjoy public spaces as a normal part of everyday life.

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,

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Haldimand-Norfolk, Brant County, Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph, Halton Region, and the Region of Waterloo. Working in partnership with politicians, planners, engineers, and citizens, walkON has created comprehensive, easy-to-use resources and tools designed to educate, empower and inspire community members. walkON has been successful in launching 17 community groups throughout Central West Ontario. One example is “Norfolk Pathways for People” who address walkable community issues in Norfolk (http://www.healthaction.ca/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=111&Itemid=90). This group has made several deputations to council, provided feedback to a secondary plan, participates in the development of a trails master plan and plans walking events.

Examples of Walkable Community initiatives supported by walkON to date

- The highly visible “Blue Bridge” pedestrian bridge crossing highway 403 in Brantford (www.healthylivingbrant.com/node/186);
- An innovative School Travel Planning pilot (www.saferoutestoschool.ca/schooltravel.asp) and a Walkability Working Group in the Region of Waterloo
- 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)

What is the Goal of Ontario Communities walkON?

The goal of Ontario Communities walkON is to replicate the success of walkON throughout all four regions of Ontario. Twenty-four communities will receive information sessions, walkability workshops, and be introduced to the walkON resources and the International Charter for Walking. These communities will be engaged in action planning to create more walkable communities and citizens will be encouraged to get involved and form community advocacy groups.

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). With the “perfect storm” of an obesity epidemic, global warming, and an ageing population bearing down on Ontarians, it is time for bold action to move walkable communities to the top or priority lists for local, regional, and provincial action.