



A healthy community

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Whether we realize it or not, a healthy community does not simply “happen.”

Yet such communities are central to all our lives. Healthy communities need to be planned for; the results can improve health and fitness, improve the economy and be better for the environment.

Historically, modern city planning was most directly related to public health for preventing disease, sanitation, getting rid of slums. Early efforts began with segregating specific uses of land into different geographic districts. After WW II, planning reduced injury and prevented disease by distributing building permits and zoning for ventilation, exposure to toxic substances, development. It also separated residential areas from industrial ones.

The characteristics of a healthy community combine many aspects of public health. They offer a clean and safe physical environment with access to food, clean water, shelter, work and recreation for all its members. The healthy community involves its citizens widely in decision-making; it respects cultural and spiritual diversity and nurtures networking and mutually supportive relationships. Access to health services including preventive programs are also features of such communities.

The concept of the “built environment” is central to good planning and management of a community’s resources. What activities occur in which areas? Where are roads built, and what sorts? What recreational opportunities are possible, and how easy is it to become involved?

How well the community is planned, and implemented, leads to secondary effects. Consider the placement of high-capacity roadways. Air quality within 80 metres of such a road means five-to-seven-year-olds living are twice as likely to experience asthma symptoms.

Road design can lead to fewer accidents and injuries — wide arterial roadways are most dangerous to pedestrians, cyclists and yes, motorists. Add traffic calming strategies to reduce speeds and not only do injuries drop, but so do stress, anxiety and incidents of road rage.

When neighbourhoods are designed to include mixed use where shops are within easy walking distance of residences and businesses, fitness improves and more feelings of “community” are established. Spread-out, car-dependent neighbourhoods mean people walk less, weigh more and consequently, are more likely suffer from obesity, hypertension, diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

The features of a healthy community are easily identified: higher density nodes or town centers; greenways with multiple uses; policies that encourage infill development (using vacant land on an existing property instead of spreading further out); mixed use zoning; regional transportation plans; and amenities like benches and bike racks.

Making communities healthy does not require tearing down what has been created. Instead, it involves good planning with the right goals in mind. Policies on transportation, zoning and land use can encourage the right sorts of development with the result of creating healthier, and better communities.

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