

# Healthy Communities

THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY PLANNING CHALLENGE

We're all familiar with the saying, *"You are what you eat."*

Perhaps it's time to add a new saying,

*"You are where you live."*

Where we live can affect our health and our life chances in many ways — the quality of the air, soil and water; opportunities for exercise and recreation; access to healthy food; the availability of jobs; the existence of social networks.

What can we do to ensure that people in every community have what they need to lead healthy lives? For starters, we can pay attention to a growing body of research on what differentiates a healthy neighbourhood from a less healthy one, and apply this knowledge in our work, whether we are planners, health professionals, educators, social service providers, or decision makers.

The Ontario Professional Planners Institute has prepared a paper that summarizes this research, and suggests ways in which we can make communities healthier and more sustainable. The paper focuses on the relationship between where we live on the one hand, and, on the other:

- Obesity and related health problems
- Air quality in transportation corridors
- Air quality in general
- Economic vitality and poverty
- Social cohesion.



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## **The effects of where we live *on obesity and related health problems***

### **WHAT WE KNOW:**

There is a statistical relationship between obesity and urban sprawl, and researchers are still investigating the nature of that relationship, which may be complicated by other factors, such as socio-economic status. Other factors that play a role include dependence on technology, work-related stress, concerns about security that keep people indoors and inactive, and access to healthy food choices.

### **THE CHALLENGE:**

Far too many Canadians live in areas that require them to use an automobile to get around. Many others live in areas where there are no stores that sell a full range of healthy foods. And some live in areas that feel unsafe, so taking casual exercise is not an option. Who can help change these realities? We call on planners, transit authorities, developers, urban designers, retailers, the police, community groups, and anyone else with an interest in healthy and safe communities to work together to give Canadians equal access to recreational opportunities and healthy food, whatever community they live in.

## **The effects of where we live *on air quality in transportation corridors***

### **WHAT WE KNOW:**

People living in neighbourhoods close to highways and major roads face an increased risk of respiratory ailments because of emissions of nitrogen oxide and volatile organic compounds, and particulate matter. Pedestrians and cyclists on busy roads are also exposed to these pollutants. Existing federal and provincial air quality standards may not be adequate to address these concerns.

### **THE CHALLENGE:**

One way to address this problem is to improve technology so that vehicles do not emit such harmful pollutants, another is to reduce the amount of traffic on the roads. The federal and provincial governments have a role to play in creating both regulations that control emissions and incentives to finding innovative ways to avoid emissions. We call on all those in the transportation field to work together to make our roads healthier and less crowded.

## **The effects of where we live *on air quality in general***

### **WHAT WE KNOW:**

Smog is largely the result of burning fossil fuels, such as coal, oil or gas for electricity or in vehicles and factories. Provincial and national borders do not stop the spread of these contaminants, so cooperation among jurisdictions is important in improving air quality.

### **THE CHALLENGE:**

Large-scale operations, wherever they are located, must be subject to federal or provincial regulation to ensure that emissions are controlled, but every Canadian can contribute by using less energy, and even in choosing to buy goods that are grown or made locally, in order to reduce the need for long distance transportation of food and other goods.

## The effects of where we live *on economic vitality and poverty*

### **WHAT WE KNOW:**

Households with the fewest economic resources may live in the least healthy areas – not only neighbourhoods that may have environmental contaminants in the air, soil, and water, but also neighbourhoods with few amenities and services. This plays out at the regional level in declining communities that are losing employers and population.

### **THE CHALLENGE:**

There are many paths to healthy and sustainable communities, and what works for one community will not work for another. People in communities that are suffering from the loss of a major industry or employer can work together on economic development that builds on existing assets – the workforce, the natural environment, local institutions, or cultural heritage. Similarly, within an urban area, everyone from municipal politicians and service providers to local businesses and residents' groups can contribute to improving declining neighbourhoods, using the assets of that neighbourhood to spur revitalization.

## The effects of where we live *on social cohesion*

### **WHAT WE KNOW:**

Modern lifestyles tend not to foster a sense of belonging in a community, or a sense of trust and reciprocity among residents of a neighbourhood. In particular, high levels of commuting are associated with a decrease in social ties among residents of a neighbourhood.

### **THE CHALLENGE:**

Communities that offer opportunities for people to get out of the house (either walking to a destination, using local services, or joining in community activities) can support social cohesion and address public health issues associated with everything from obesity to mental health. But creating these inclusive communities means that residents must come together to talk about how they want their community to evolve, and how they can manage change sustainably. Decision makers need to work with community groups to create healthy, sustainable communities where all residents have a voice.



# What Can You Do to *get involved?*

- Read the Call to Action and full paper *Healthy Communities, Sustainable Communities* at [www.ontarioplanners.on.ca](http://www.ontarioplanners.on.ca). The web site also contains information on events sponsored by the Ontario Professional Planners Institute relating to these issues.
- Calculate your environmental footprint by going to [www.myfootprint.org](http://www.myfootprint.org) and following the suggestions for reducing that footprint.
- Evaluate your neighbourhood's sustainability from a greenhouse gas perspective using a tool created by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation at [www.cmhc.ca/od/?pid=62424](http://www.cmhc.ca/od/?pid=62424).
- Check out the walkability of your neighbourhood at [www.walkscore.com](http://www.walkscore.com).
- Help make your own community healthier and more sustainable by working with a residents' group, a school, a community centre, or any other neighbourhood institution.
- Lobby for stronger federal and provincial regulations to address air quality.
- Call your local representatives and ensure that your Council is supporting and promoting sustainable and healthy communities that emphasize good urban design, active transportation, and green infrastructure.
- Contact your own professional association to find out what it is doing to contribute to healthy, sustainable communities. The Ontario Professional Planners Institute is interested in cooperating with other associations to raise awareness of these issues and contribute to community change.

