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GROWING DEMAND FOR COMMUNITIES THAT PROMOTE HEALTH

Research suggests that the design of cities and neighbourhoods can make it difficult for children and adults to be physically active.^{1, 2} Suburban streets often lack sidewalks and many schools are located in close proximity to multi-lane highways and other traffic hazards. These and other environmental factors contribute to low physical activity levels among the population.

Statistics Canada reports that, in 2005, only 4 out of 10 adult Quebecers reached the weekly recommended level of physical activity necessary for health benefits; the recommended energy output is 1,000 kilocalories per week.³

What is a Traditional Design?

Traditional design refers to quality space, which is compact, dense and has many uses (residential, commercial, parks/green spaces, etc.). Walking and cycling are made easy by means of direct routes and, combined with public transportation, these modes of transportation are possible, safe and most of all, the streetscape makes it very comfortable (benches, bicycle racks, streetlamps, bus shelters, art, etc.). Buildings along and facing the street provide a feeling of security and better define user space, due to the presence of foot traffic.

Many health and planning officials believe that traditionally designed Neighbourhoods, those with shops and schools within walking distance of homes, plus a network of bike paths and sidewalks, can help children and adults get more daily physical activity. These communities are often called walkable Neighbourhoods because residents can walk to nearby destinations like shops and schools. Research shows that people living in traditional communities are more physically active^{4,5} and less likely to be overweight or obese.⁶ Traditionally designed Neighbourhoods are recommended by the Surgeon General⁷ – the equivalent of the *Ministre de la Santé* in Québec – and Institute of Medicine⁸ for curbing the obesity epidemic, but many zoning laws, development regulations and transportation policies make it challenging to create communities that facilitate walking and biking.

Key Research Results

Québec needs a solution for health problems linked to suburban living

Due to long commutes and an increasing dependence on cars for daily errands, people living in urban sprawl are facing serious health consequences. A study of 33 communities in California in 2006 found that the obesity rate for adults who drove the most was 27 percent, three times higher than the rate for people who spent less time in the car.⁹

There also is a connection between the suburban lifestyle and smog. Environmentalists found that traditionally designed Neighbourhoods help keep pollution down by allowing people to commute by foot or by using public transportation.¹⁰

Neighbourhoods can be designed to promote active living

Residents of pedestrian-friendly neighbourhoods are more likely to meet physical activity guidelines and exercise regularly.^{11,12} A survey of 2,614 adults aged 45 and over from 112 census tracts, showed that people are more likely to walk for utilitarian purposes in a neighbourhood with a large number of destinations that can be reached on foot.¹³

A study conducted by the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) compared four neighbourhoods designed according to the principles of new urbanism – which makes them pedestrian-friendly – and four conventional suburban neighbourhoods, showed that 51% of the respondents from pedestrian-friendly neighbourhoods reported walking and biking to local services and stores several times a week, compared to only 19% for suburban households; one of the neighbourhoods in the study was on the Island of Montreal.¹⁴

Public support for walkable neighbourhoods has risen dramatically

According to national survey data reported by Susan Handy and co-authors at the University of California, Davis, public support for traditionally designed communities increased from 44 percent in 2003 to nearly 60 percent in 2005.¹⁵ Survey participants were asked how much they would encourage the development of a traditionally designed community – defined by the survey as one with walking and biking trails, easy access to public transportation and a town center where homes are clustered around shops and office buildings – in their area.

In the SMHC study mentioned above, residents of traditional pedestrian-friendly neighbourhoods implemented in three Canadian cities, including Montréal, felt a greater sense of belonging to their neighbourhood than residents of suburbs (50% in the first category compared to 36% in the second), even though the first group had lived in their neighbourhood for a much shorter period of time than the second group.¹⁴

Almost all groups support traditionally designed neighbourhoods

Handy's study¹⁵ showed that Americans, across ethnic, gender and even political lines, like the idea of living in a traditionally designed neighbourhood, as illustrated in the graph. They study also found that Americans, as a whole, like specific characteristics associated with those communities, including living in a neighbourhood that allows seniors to age in place; preserves green space; allows for more family time. Rural residents were the only group with a majority who did not support traditionally designed neighbourhoods. This finding might reflect the fact that people living in such areas reject any kind of development that may spoil the rural beauty.

Americans believe that traditionally designed communities offer many valuable benefits

Survey participants indicated that the biggest advantages of traditionally designed communities were the benefits they present to both children and seniors. On average, respondents thought it very likely that traditionally designed communities offer many of these attributes, such as safe places for kids to play; pedestrian-friendly features that allow residents to walk or bike to public transportation; an environment that encourages independent living among the elderly; and land set aside for parks and open spaces.

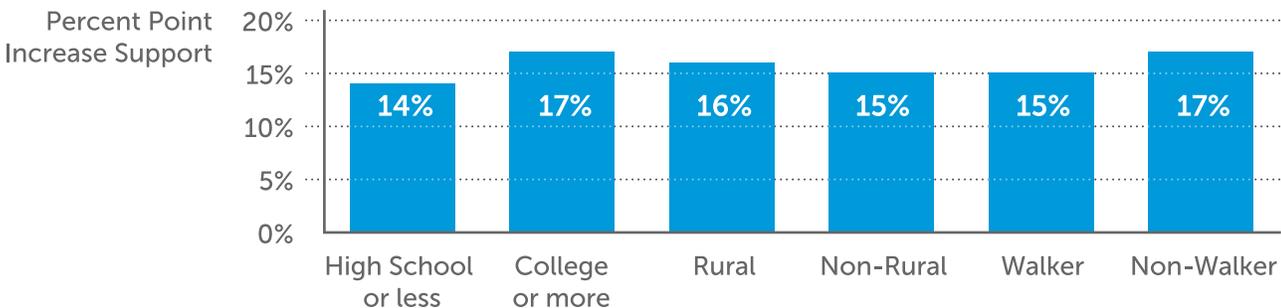
Top Five Expectations about Traditionally Designed Communities¹⁵

- Allow kids to walk to school
- Be safe for kids to play in neighbourhood
- Enable people to walk/bike to public transit
- Enable people to walk/bike to shopping
- Enable older adults to live independently



Characteristics with Biggest Increases in "Importance" of Living in Traditionally Designed Communities from 2003 to 2005¹⁵

- Be able to walk or bike to shopping
- Be able to walk or bike to public transportation
- Be able to walk or bike to public transportation



From unpublished analysis of datas¹⁵.

FIGURE 1. Increase of public support for implementing pedestrian-friendly neighbourhoods between 2003 and 2006 according to various characteristics of the population (in %)



Conclusions

Handy's study¹⁵ and other evidence¹⁶ suggest that the demand for traditionally designed communities likely will continue to rise. Health concerns, a growing desire to decrease dependence on cars and gruelling commutes that take time away from our families may continue to push many Americans out of the suburbs – and into more traditionally designed neighbourhoods.¹⁷

- Traditionally designed neighbourhoods offer a lifestyle that encourages daily walking and biking, activities that can help keep many in a healthy weight range. The “weight-control” aspect of traditionally neighbourhoods may help curb the nation's obesity epidemic.
- Community designs with houses located near shops and office parks mean that commuters can walk to work or take public transport, which gives people more transportation options and cuts down on pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.
- Consumer support for, and interest in, traditionally designed communities is rising.
- People feel that traditionally designed neighbourhoods offer many important benefits to children. This could be attributed to the close proximity of homes to schools, which allows children to walk and bike to school more easily.¹⁷
- A traditionally designed community allows residents to walk easily to nearby shops. Regular physical activity contributes to overall health, and may help some seniors maintain a more independent lifestyle.

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