



Walkability

Photo Credit: City of Saline Strategic Plan

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Walkability is the extent to which a neighbourhood's built environment is walkable, or simply, pedestrian friendly (The City of Edmonton, 2009). A pedestrian is defined as "any person traveling by foot and any mobility-impaired person using a wheelchair" (Lo, 2009, p. 146). Conversely, transforming walkability into **mobility**, or even **livability**.

In a sense, walkability is the foundation for sustainable communities. Walking is an environmentally conscious mode of transport that reduces congestion, conserves energy with minimum pollution, while also having **health, social, and recreational values** (Forsyth & Southworth, 2008). Walking is a, "socially equitable mode of transport that is available to a majority of the population across classes, including children and seniors" (2008, p. 1). It is primarily a function of the **connectivity** and **proximity** between destinations, or the degree to which citizens can **travel between places** where they live, play, and work (University of British Columbia).

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Rural Walkability

Rural neighbourhoods encounter unique walkable challenges. Rural villages and towns are places with a low population, little density, and are distinct from urban centres; providing challenges such as, "longer distances, narrower roads with no places to walk . . . no paved shoulders or sidewalks, and no crossings" (California WALKS, 2012). However, as walkability is a central component of sustainable and complete communities, there is a need for rural communities to understand and examine creative possibilities in transforming their neighbourhoods into walkable communities, that may not necessarily emulate urban characteristics and concepts.

Importance of Age-Friendly Walkability

Walkability is an integral aspect of vibrant, healthy, and complete communities. Walking is an essential aspect of senior's lives, it reduces the risk of a wide variety of health problems, connects isolated seniors, provides recreation, and fosters economic opportunities. It can be argued that well-designed, compact communities that reduce the need to drive have a number of health, economic, and environmental benefits for people of all ages (Esbaugh, 2010).



Figure #1: People walking on recreational trail in Caledonia, Ontario

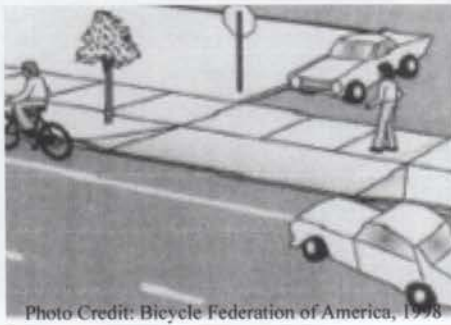


Photo Credit: Bicycle Federation of America, 1998
Figure #2: Conventional Driveway minimally slows turning vehicles



Photo Credit: FHWA Safety, 2009
Figure #3: Adding a median in a cross-walk adds more time for pedestrians while calming traffic

Creating Walkable Communities

Creating age friendly walkable communities, means more than adding sidewalks and trails. Developing walkable places means orienting the environment to support pedestrians, bicycles, and automobiles in a 'multi-modal' community that is well-connected with places to walk to (Bicycle Federation of America, 1998). Walkable communities should seek to have town centres, population of mixed-income, mixed uses, density, well-used public spaces, age-friendly universal design, and an active street life. These components that construct walkability can be examined from five distinct pedestrian levels of service: accessibility, density, safety, aesthetics, and connectivity (City of Kansas, 2003).

Accessibility: Neighbourhood's designed infrastructure should be in accordance to equitable universal design standards so they ensure accessibility not only to those with physical impairments, but cognitive as well.

Density: High-density, mixed-use development allows residents to meet all their basic needs within their community and within relatively close vicinity (American Planning Association, 2006).

Safety: Communities should be designed to provide security and safety for pedestrians. This involves proper lighting, traffic calming, weather, infrastructure maintenance, clear ways, grade changes (curb cuts and ramps), and adequate sidewalks and road shoulders (City of Anacortes, 2006).

Aesthetics: Walkable communities evoke and invite pedestrians of all ages to walk through scenic and character opportunities, provide visual interest, are attractive, have pedestrian furnishes, and often have tree coverages as well as outdoor trails.

Connectivity: Walkable neighbourhoods seek to connect citizens to places of interest and necessity by providing efficient directivity, continual linkages, safe road-crossings, and pleasant way finding.

Quantifying Walkability in Your Community

Measuring walkability allows a community to **identify** their areas of **success and challenges**, while also recognizing their specific **wants and needs**. There are a wide variety of tools, audits, and assessments a community can choose

"Walking around neighbourhoods should be a treat to the senses"

(Abbott, 2009, p. 187)



Photo Credit: City of Kansas
Figure #4: Seniors walking down designated walking trail in Kansas

Figure #5: Photo displaying lack of connectivity in Rural Sidewalks in Ontario



Photo Credit: Esbaugh, 2010

Figure #6: Photo displaying connected and improved sidewalk and crossings in Ontario



Photo Credit: Esbaugh, 2010

Rural walkability helps create and foster age-friendly communities

from when analyzing their walk-score. As no neighbourhood is exact, there is no specific measure of walkability; but each attempts to examine the physical, built, and social environment. Robert Johnson's Active Living Research (ALR) posts over 20 walking audit instruments (<http://www.activelivingresearch.org/alr/resourcesearch/toolsandmeasures>). Walking around with children and seniors with a "walkability check-list" is also an easy way to experience the sense of walkability in one's community. Saskatoon and the US Department of Transportation's Walkability Checklist, are 2 checklists that can be used.

Examples & Resources for Further Investigation

Rural walkability is a nation-wide topic in converting communities into age-friendly places. A number of rural communities have placed walkability as a main strategy in their official plans. These examples provide further research, information, ideas, and strategies for communities looking at making their communities more walkable.

"Healthy Neighborhoods: Walkability and Air Pollution" looks at **health and pollution** in urban and suburban walkable communities in the Metro Vancouver area. "Development of the Scottish Walkability Assessment Tool (SWAT)" objectively assess the walkability of the **physical environment** in Glasgow, Scotland. The Senior Walking Environmental Assessment Tool-Revised (SWEAT-R) evaluates

neighbourhood design in terms of **senior walkability**. "Active Seattle: Achieving Walkability in Diverse Neighborhoods" provides **policies and projects** communities have used to promote and support walkable cities, as well as an examination of complete streets while using social marketing and education. Kansas City's Walkability Plan provides tools for walkability **measurement and assessment** while also discussing a number of **case studies** of rural and urban communities **policies, plans, and strategies** in implementing walkable design. "Creating Walkable Communities: A Guide for Local Governments" is a good resource for examining **design principles** for walkability. "Rural Walking in Massachusetts" also provides further **toolkits** in walkability, but primarily for *rural communities*. "Addressing Rural Health Needs: Walkable Communities" is another resource for rural walkability, but this article has a more Canadian focus. **Solutions** to walkable challenges in creating walkable neighbourhoods can be found in Ontario's "Walk-On" document.



Figure #7: Seniors walking down nature path in rural Ontario

Final Thoughts

As walkability enhances the personal physical, mental and social health of a community member, while also benefitting the larger community, it is evident that it is an integral topic to be discussed when addressing issues of rural planning in the context of developing age-friendly communities.

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