

Healthy Built Environment Lens

Ensuring our Communities are Designed to Maximize Health

Introduction

In June 2011, the New Westminster Healthier Community Partnership Committee was established. This committee, which includes representation from the City of New Westminster, Fraser Health and School District #40, is mandated to promote New Westminster as a Healthy Community. More specifically, it is intended to positively impact the health of citizens and is based on the premise that many health issues are best resolved through collaborative, community-based initiatives. It is also intended to move the focus of health from treatment and remediation to promotion and prevention.



Based on a foundational document prepared by Fraser Health,¹ the committee identified five priority areas for 2012/13. One of the priority areas was ‘healthy built environments’ and one of the short-term actions under this area was to: “raise public awareness about how municipal planning related to the built environment can positively or negatively impact health and wellbeing.” A sub-committee was established to address this action and it decided to develop a lens or set of questions to assist decision-makers, design professionals and the public to review and evaluate planning and development proposals based on healthy built environment principles and considerations.

The Built Environment and its Relationship to Health

The built environment refers to ‘people-made’ characteristics such as buildings, parks, schools, transportation systems and other infrastructure that are used on a daily basis. The built environment, through its design and use, can positively or negatively impact health and safety.

Overweight and obesity are serious health problems in Canada. Rates of overweight and obesity have been climbing steadily for the past 30 years.

Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada, 2011



The way communities are designed can influence physical activity, nutrition and obesity and can contribute to air pollution and increased rates of injury and death. Based on the available evidence, the cited characteristics of the built environment (table 1) are associated with enhanced health outcomes.²

Sponsors



¹ Fraser Health, *Healthier Community Partnership: Community Action Plan Score Card Report for New Westminster*.

² Smart Growth BC, *Creating Healthy Communities: Tools and Actions to Foster Environments for Healthy Living*, 2009

Table 1

Built Environment Characteristics	Health Impact	Health Outcome
Increased urban residential density and land use mix	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased walking and cycling • Increased use of public transit • Decreased pollution through reduced vehicular usage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased obesity • Decreased respiratory illnesses
Increased road and pathway connectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased physical activity • Improved safety through street design 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased obesity • Reduced traffic-related injuries
Increased availability of recreation facilities and parks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased physical activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased obesity • Increased social cohesion
Increased availability of affordable and adaptable housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased inclusion, including by vulnerable populations • Increased ability to age in place 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased social cohesion • Reduced health disparities • Improved health and longevity
Increased access to healthy food options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved diets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased obesity

Current Initiatives related to the Built Environment

There are a number of municipal initiatives underway or in the planning stages that will shape the built environment and potentially impact health. The three most significant of these initiatives are the City’s Integrated Community Sustainability Plan and Master Transportation Plan, both of which are underway, and the Official Community Plan, which will be prepared during 2013/14. Other initiatives, while more limited in scope, will also have an impact. These include: area and neighbourhood plans; community garden and food security programs; new recreation, park, pathway and trail proposals; private development projects; and transportation and infrastructure upgrades.



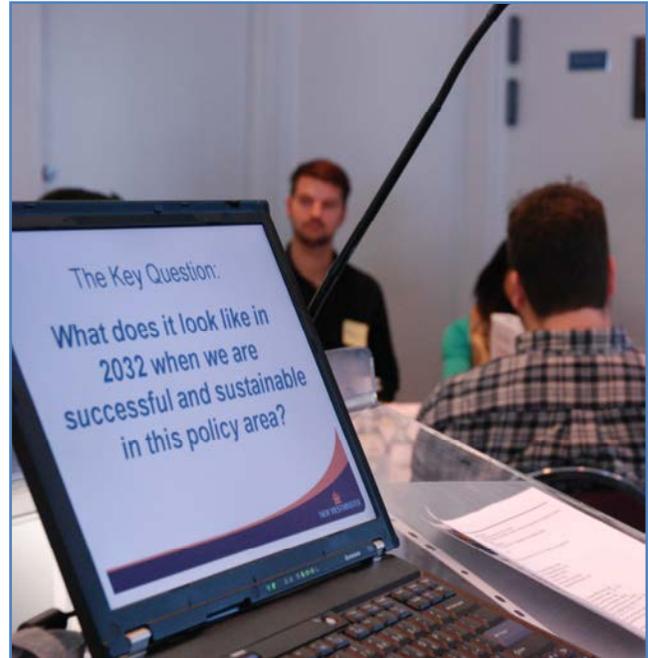
A recent study showed that for every 5% improvement in the walkability of a neighbourhood (e.g., increased density, land use mix and street connectivity), adults who live there tend to walk and cycle 32% more, have lower Body Mass Index levels and enjoy reduced pollution from automobiles.
Smart Growth BC, 2009



Policy Development and Decision-Making

The responsibility for local governance and decision-making resides with the elected City Council and School Board Trustees. While the two bodies set policy, it is often informed and implemented by the administration and staff team. The public can also inform policy development through consultation opportunities.

Given the important role of elected officials, administrators and staff, it is important that they understand the relationship between the built environment and health. It is also important that they have information and tools to guide them with regard to policy development and decision-making.



Important Role of Public Consultation



The land use decisions made today have long-lasting consequences and the public has the power to shape the built environment so that it encourages and provides opportunities for community members to make healthier choices.

In order to inform these land use decisions, the public needs information to understand the relationship between the built environment and health and consultation opportunities. Even when one understands the relationship, it can be difficult to provide feedback or input. To this end, it is often helpful if there is a lens or set of questions which addresses the topic area and which can be applied to the planning or development proposal. This type of tool can initiate discussion, focus the dialogue and facilitate further inquiry. It can also maximize the consultation opportunity, as time is not spent formulating questions but rather exploring the relationship and providing informed input to enhance health outcomes.

Built Environment Lens

The following is a healthy built environment lens or set of questions (table 2). It is grouped according to five overarching categories related to health – i.e., neighbourhood infrastructure, natural environments, food networks, transportation systems, and housing choices. Depending on the planning or development proposal, not all questions will be relevant. As such, it should be reviewed prior to a consultation opportunity.

Local governments that are committed to public engagement invest funding and in-kind support to build the community's capacity to partner with their staff to achieve better health outcomes.

Smart Growth BC, 2009



Table 2

Healthy Neighbourhood Infrastructure
• Does the proposal provide a mix of land uses (e.g., residential, retail, service)?
• Does the proposal facilitate connectivity within the neighborhood?
• Does the proposal create opportunities for people to be active, play and socialize?
• Does the proposal provide adequate green and open space?
Healthy Natural Environments
• Does the proposal address or mitigate traffic-related air pollution?
• Does the proposal incorporate measures to reduce exposure to green house gas emissions?
• Does the proposal include design features that prevent increased temperatures in urban areas?
• Does the proposal minimize environmental hazards to vulnerable populations?
• Is the proposal compatible with adjacent land uses and local natural conditions?
Healthy Food Networks
• Does the proposal enhance access to healthy food choices?
• Does the proposal contribute to food security?
• Does the proposal provide opportunities for private or communal gardening?
Healthy Transportation Systems
• Does the proposal encourage active transportation (e.g., walking, biking, transit usage)?
• Does the proposal connect with existing transit services?
• Does the proposal address safety for pedestrians, cyclists, drivers and transit users?
Healthy Housing Choices
• Does the proposal address housing affordability?
• Does the proposal incorporate a mix and density of housing options?
• Does the proposal facilitate aging in place (i.e., accessible and adaptable)?
• Is the proposal conveniently located to services and amenities?
Other Considerations – please self identify
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To receive a listing of references and resource materials used to develop this document or to find out more about the New Westminster Healthier Community Partnership Committee and its work, go to:

http://www.newwestcity.ca/about_the_city/living_in_new_westminster/healthier-communities-partnership