

Designing Communities to Support Active Living: Using Municipal Bylaws to Promote Health

October 2010

Issue:

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) estimates that 25% of cancer cases worldwide are caused by overweight or obesity and a sedentary, inactive lifestyle (1). The rise in diseases, including cancer, with causes in common with overweight and obesity has become a global public health epidemic requiring government intervention (2). Government policy can be a helpful tool to address physical environments in communities that create barriers to walking, bicycling, and other forms of activity (2). Policies such as bylaws, land use guidelines and design standards can enhance opportunities for physical activity in the built environment by regulating proximity to parks and playgrounds, the net residential density, street connectivity, and land use mix to influence active living pursuits (3, 4). Increasing physical activity levels of Albertans will reduce the risk of various chronic diseases, including cancer, as well as enhance overall well-being (2).

One way local governments can design their communities to influence and promote health is through the creation and enforcement of municipal bylaws (2,5). The Municipal Government Act authorizes local governments in Alberta to create and enforce bylaws in order to maintain the health, safety and wellness of their community and citizens(6). Communities that emphasize outdoor recreation in their design and create welcoming places for both spontaneous and structured play support balanced child and youth development and healthier residents overall (4, 7, 8). For example, land use bylaws can allow for the creation of community gardens, foot paths to local schools and business developments to support active transportation, and can permit short-term closures of roadways to create walkable pedestrian shopping malls. However, sometimes bylaws which were originally enacted to as a precaution to protect citizen safety, can have the unintended consequence of restricting opportunities for physical activity by residents (2). For example, traffic bylaws can prevent children from playing road hockey on residential streets as well as ban skateboarding or cycling (9). Unfortunately, 96% of 24 major municipalities surveyed in Canada report having a policy that hinders physical activity participation for children and youth (10).

Benefits to Taking Action:

Designing communities to increase the walkability and connectivity of neighborhoods and improve access to community-based recreation, active living and sport opportunities can foster an increased sense of community, social cohesion and improve the health of residents (11-13).

- Residents will have increased access to ‘play’ and unstructured physical activity options (walking, jogging, biking, road hockey, rollerblading and skateboarding) which will invite residents to be active in their communities (11, 14, 15). This can decrease the perception held by 33.8 % of Albertans that access is a barrier to physical activity (5).
- Creating physical environments which encourage residents to be physically active in outdoor community settings can also serve to discourage crime (‘eyes on the street’) and increase perceived safety amongst residents (16). This is an important outcome as people are less likely to engage in physical activity if they perceive it to be unsafe, even if the actual risk is low (2, 4).
- Using bylaws to increase the available choice, feasibility, and safety of transportation options in communities (bicycling, skateboarding, walking, etc.) can decrease motor vehicle traffic and increase active transport in Alberta. This would also assist to address the issue of transportation equity; many communities in Alberta are built so that basic travel is difficult without a car, yet the cost of owning and operating a vehicle is becoming too much for some families and individuals (16, 17). Furthermore, time spent commuting in cars has been found to negatively impact

community well being, damage a sense of community by restricting opportunities to build trust and formal and informal networks, pollute and degrade the natural environment and increase stress (16-18).

- Designing communities with an aim to create pleasant, accessible spaces to engage in physical activity (foot/bike paths, skateboard parks, closed-streets) can serve to increase the aesthetic appeal of Albertan streets and communities and is shown to promote physical activity (2).

Considerations:

Municipalities are responsible for protecting the safety of community residents. Local governments are rightfully concerned about the legal risks and liability issues in specific community locations where allowing certain forms of physical activity (i.e. skateboarding) could create new risks for other residents (pedestrians). This issue of safety versus liability can push officials to enact community-wide bylaws which don't take into account other reasonable context and location specific opportunities. For example, in the City of Edmonton it is unlawful to obstruct a street with objects (like a hockey net) or to stand in the street and obstruct traffic (9). On a busy road this makes sense for obvious safety reasons. However, in other residential areas where the traffic volume is low, preventing kids from playing in the street for safety reasons can be inconsistent with creating healthy communities.

Evidence from a recent survey of decision-makers from Government, schools, workplaces and the media suggests there is strong support for changing the design of neighborhoods and communities to encourage informal physical activity in daily life, with 85% in favor of such actions (19). Enhancing the quality and quantity of green spaces (93%), and changing community design standards to encourage physical activity (63%) were also interventions with high levels of support (19).

APCCP Priorities for Action:

- Advocate for the removal or amendment of those bylaws which restrict physical activity when not necessary for public safety.
- Promote the creation of bylaws, land use guidelines and design standards that support physical activity (i.e. walkability, creation and maintenance foot and bike paths and other infrastructure, lighting and safety regulations, pedestrian friendly cross walks, short-term closures of streets to support community initiatives like pedestrian malls etc.).

What's Next:

- The APCCP will assess the current state of bylaws which restrict or promote physical activity in Alberta municipalities (how many cities have enacted these bylaws) and evaluate the relative value of interventions according to size of municipalities (i.e., where should the APCCP focus its efforts in order to make the biggest impact).
- The APCCP will undertake discussions with provincial municipal affairs and public health officials to determine interest in the issue and feasibility of various approaches.
- The APCCP will undertake discussions with municipal officials to determine local interest in the issue and feasibility of various approaches.
- The APCCP will assess the potential for linking advocacy and awareness-raising activities to the annual Hockey Night in Canada, Official Canadian Street Hockey Tournament (June 2011[S2]) as a vehicle for drawing attention to the bylaws restricting physical activity and to develop media and public support for future interventions (20-23).

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