

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

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Issue:

The World Health Organization estimates that approximately 6% of deaths worldwide are caused by a sedentary, inactive lifestyle (1). Physical inactivity is a common risk factor for becoming overweight or obese, as well as for the development of many chronic diseases, including cancer (2). In Canada, over half of adults and almost a third of children and adolescents are classified as overweight or obese (3, 4). The increasing prevalence of obesity, alongside its link to chronic diseases and cancer, has set forth a global public health epidemic that requires government intervention (2, 5).

Municipal governments can increase physical activity levels and support the health of their residents by designing communities that promote active and healthy living. One way municipalities can achieve this goal is through the creation and enforcement of municipal bylaws (2, 6-8) that ensure that the physical (or built) environments of communities are supportive of walking, bicycling, and other forms of physical activity (2, 9). For example, land use bylaws and city design standards can enhance opportunities for physical activity in the built environment by ensuring proximity to parks and playgrounds, regulating residential density, and increasing street connectivity and mixed land use (9-13). More specifically, land use bylaws can allow for the construction of foot paths to local schools, designated pedestrian areas where roads are made discontinuous to automobile traffic (13), and the creation of community gardens. In addition, business growth and development has been linked to increased active transportation within communities (14).

While there are many municipal policies that support citizen health, sometimes municipal bylaws enacted to protect citizen safety have the unintended consequence of restricting opportunities for physical activity (2). For example, traffic bylaws can prevent children from playing road hockey on residential streets as well as skateboarding or cycling on sidewalks (15). Unfortunately, according to a 2010 report, 96% of 24 major Canadian municipalities surveyed had a community-level policy in place, such as an advertised bylaw stating “Ball and Hockey Playing Prohibited,” that hinders physical activity participation for children and youth (16). Therefore, it is important that municipalities look at the potential negative side effects of such bylaws and consider these repercussions when determining whether to enact them.

Ensuring that municipal policies and community design are supportive of active living and active transportation will help to increase physical activity levels of Albertans and reduce the risk of various chronic diseases, including cancer, as well as enhance overall well-being (2). 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 (7, 9, 11, 17).

Benefits to Taking Action:

Designing communities that are walkable, connected, and have easy access to recreation and sport opportunities can facilitate a sense of community and help to improve the health of residents (18-22).

- Residents will have increased access to ‘play’ and unstructured physical activity options (walking, jogging, biking, road hockey, rollerblading, and skateboarding), which will help to make it easier for residents to be active in their communities (18, 23-25).
- Creating physical environments that encourage residents to be physically active in outdoor community settings can serve to discourage crime and increase perceived safety amongst residents (26).
- Using bylaws to increase the available choice, feasibility, and safety of transportation options (bicycling, skateboarding, walking, etc.) in communities can decrease motor vehicle traffic and increase active transport in Alberta (27). This would also help to address the issue of transportation equity (6, 28) as many communities in Alberta are built in such a way that basic travel is difficult without a car, yet the cost of owning and operating a

vehicle is becoming too expensive for some individuals and families (26). Furthermore, time spent commuting in a car has been found to negatively impact community well-being (particularly in terms of increased obesity risk and stress levels), damage a sense of community by restricting opportunities for social interaction, and pollute and degrade the natural environment.(26, 29-32).

- Designing communities with an aim to create pleasant, connected, and accessible spaces to engage in physical activity (foot/bike paths, skateboard parks, closed-streets) can serve to increase the aesthetic appeal of Alberta communities and is shown to promote physical activity (2, 33, 34).
- Evidence suggests that environments (such as parks, urban design, transportation, school, and workplaces) designed to support active living are associated with a wide range of additional benefits including environmental sustainability (carbon emissions and pollution) and economic advantages (i.e. land value, governmental infrastructure costs, health care costs, etc.) (9, 14).

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 that do not consider reasonable context and location specific opportunities. For example, in the City of Edmonton it is unlawful to obstruct a street with objects (e.g. hockey net) or to stand in the street and obstruct traffic (15). On a busy road, these safety considerations make such bylaws appropriate. 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.

A 2014 survey of policy influencers in government, schools, workplaces, and the media found that 94% of Albertans surveyed support changing the design of neighborhoods and communities to encourage informal physical activity in daily life (35). Other highly supported interventions included development of active transportation policies (95%), enhancing the quality and quantity of green spaces (98%), and changing community design standards to promote physical activity (87%) (35). Further, according to a 2014 survey administered to 1,200 people in Alberta, the vast majority of respondents (90%) support the development of active transportation policies (35).

APCCP Priorities for Action:

- Advocate for the removal or amendment of bylaws that restrict physical activity when not necessary for public safety.
- Promote the creation of bylaws, land use guidelines, and design standards that support physical activity.

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