

Walkability Improves Community Livability

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In considering the subject of walkable communities, I spent quite sometime thinking about the best way to approach it. It is easy to get lost in jargon or technical mumbo-jumbo. However, if people really want to see and even work toward significantly improving the walkability of their community, the only place to start is with knowledge.

Why is community walkability important? The short answer is that a considerable number of people either must use or choose means of travel other than the car. This includes school children, seniors, and folks in between. What's more, as the population ages, and that's a given, more people will be moving from the 'driving' category to the 'walking category'.

Perhaps the most central question concerning building or promoting walkable communities is why there is the need to do so in the first place. Is there a problem with how our communities are being planned and built? Is there a problem with how we get around town on a daily basis? The answer is resounding yes - no question about it!

There has been a ground-swell of involvement and support for improving the livability of our communities by increasing sustainability, reducing green house gas emissions, and the like. One major indicator of community livability is its walkability.

By walkability, I refer to the ease with which people of all ages and mobility levels can move around their community without the reliance on a motor vehicle. This includes such issues as the feeling of personal safety at all times of the day in all locations; the quality of the experience for the cyclist and pedestrian alike - are the pathways visually appealing and comfortable to walk on or are they hostile, barren environments such as what might be the case on a narrow, unmaintained strip of sidewalk right beside a busy road or highway; and finally, the degree to

which the key locations and services in the community are linked by a walkable pedestrian network.

Before the reliance on the motor vehicle, cities, communities, neighbourhoods were designed to respond to the scale of a human being and were inherently walkable. So how did we get to where we are now - traffic congestion that increases every year making it more difficult to get to and from work or around town, less time at home with family and more time in an isolated car, anxiety over our children riding bikes on streets and sidewalks or crossing streets because of traffic/ speed, fear of walking at night, personal isolation in suburban neighbourhoods, increasing property crime and vandalism, and streets that have been increasingly given over to managing ever increasing traffic - the list goes on.

Quite simply, it is a function of how communities have been planned and built over that past 50 years. Some sobering thoughts:

- North Americans, on average, drive approximately twice the number of miles than 20 years ago to do the same things.
- Living one hours drive from the workplace translates into approximately 500 hours or 12 work weeks per year inside the car.
- The average North American suburban household generates in excess of 12 vehicle trips per day.

The better our communities are designed - that is the less they are designed around the needs of the car and the more they designed around the needs of people - the better they will be to live in from every measure, and the more walkable they will be as a result.

Suburban communities are often places that provide no other alternative to the automobile to get to work, the grocery store, drop the kids off to school and soccer practice, or go for a quiet cup of coffee for instance. There is typically a total reliance on the car to be able to function on a daily basis.

If you don't have a car or cannot drive - you have got a challenge. At an individual level, consider the average cost of owning and operating a modest automobile in Canada as determined by the Canadian Automobile Association for 2003 - approximately \$9,067 for up to 18,000 kilometres. Converting this cost to an equivalent residential mortgage at 5% interest amortized over 30 years translates into \$150,000 of home-purchasing power.

Furthermore, consider the tremendous amount of research and product development that has occurred over recent years in an effort to reduce housing cost. Despite all of the advances in building material technology such as plastic water piping, hollow doors, MDF moldings, finger-jointed studs, OSB wall sheathing and vinyl-siding, the combined savings do not amount to half of the cost savings that could be achieved by designing our communities to allow households to own one fewer car.

So what can one do to improve the walkability and livability of our community? Well, it starts with the initiative to learn more about why our communities and neighbourhoods are not walkable and livable and what can be done to make them more so.

It also requires that the community takes the next step of voicing its concerns about the need for specific change to local government. The District of Maple Ridge is currently involved in rewriting the Official Community Plan which is the vision for how Maple Ridge will grow over the next decade. It is a perfect time for residents to participate in an effort to improve the livability and walkability of the community.

If you are interested in learning more about walkability, I encourage you to check out the Walkable Communities website at www.walkable.org.