

If we build 'walkable' neighborhoods, will people walk?

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Edmontonians love their cars. In fact, 77 percent of us make all our trips by car. So if we know that it's healthier to walk, will developing more walkable neighbourhoods help to break the habit and get us walking to the store instead?

Researcher Marianne Clark in the Faculty of [Physical Education](#) and Recreation set out to investigate the factors that influence the decisions made by key stakeholders involved in neighbourhood development. She interviewed 17 stakeholders in neighbourhood development, including [public health](#) and municipal employees, city councilors, and private sector stakeholders including land developers and food retailers.

"We asked about their definition of a healthy neighbourhood. What they thought their role was; what facilitated their efforts to build healthy neighbourhoods and what barriers they experienced," says Clark. "We also wanted to know about 'food security' - in essence the importance of the proximity of grocery stores with affordable healthy food choices."

"There were varying views among stakeholders as to whether walkable neighbourhoods are really going to make that much of a difference in making people active," says Clark. "While municipal employees and public health officials believed deeply in the value of these neighbourhoods, developers generally thought the extent of their responsibility was limited to market and consumer demands. They were also sceptical of the notion of 'if you built it, they will walk.' According to developers, it's up to the individual whether they choose to walk or

not, regardless of the design of the neighbourhood, but they also acknowledged that our social norms and customs are very entrenched in car culture."

Private sector stakeholders said that people generally see success as having a single-family home. "To create affordable housing," notes Clark, "you have to build in the suburbs. There's a [social hierarchy](#) thing going on that may not change or disappear just because neighbourhoods are built more walkable or dense. There's also the car culture and the consumer culture (to contend with.)"

"Car dependency/reliance" - the need to be able to drive everywhere easily from home, was mentioned by all stakeholders interviewed, as pervasive in Edmonton, notes Clark. Land developers also noted Edmonton's cold climate and plenty of space to keep pushing the boundaries of Edmonton, also lent to the pervasive car culture.

Budget was another commonly-cited constraint.

In a surprise finding, Clark says, "People's access to good, healthy food, such as at affordable grocery stores was not generally perceived as a problem. Edmonton has a very diverse range of socio-economic status (SES) neighbourhoods and populations. (This fact) was overlooked by most stakeholders, but city councilors were more aware and spoke to it most directly."

What all stakeholders agreed on was that to build neighbourhoods so they were conducive to healthy, active lifestyles involved collaboration from all stakeholders when neighbourhood developments were in the planning stages.

Notes Clark, " There are lingering tensions about what the end results of these neighbourhoods might actually be; where the responsibilities lie in

terms of public and private sectors. That question is more complicated than what we've thought it was before.

"When we look at this issue, though, we need to look at the broader societal issues. We may be naïve to think that if we build these great neighbourhoods that everything's going to change and everyone's going to start walking more and be more healthy," says Clark.

Provided by University of Alberta

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