

Official Plan as a means to facilitate health friendly environments

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Executive Summary

In Canada, health issues such as heart disease, cancers, asthma, diabetes, obesity, stress and depression, and injuries and fatalities are a growing concern. Sedentary lifestyles, poor diets, and reliance on automobiles are thought to be significant contributors to these serious health problems. Increasing recognition is being given to the important role the built environment can play in shaping the health of individuals and their communities.

Through its policy initiatives and urban design guidelines, a municipality's official plan is a tool with the potential to guide development in a way that promotes health-friendly built environments. In establishing policies and design characteristics that foster more active forms of transportation, produce vibrant and accessible public spaces, and enhance access to healthy foods, official plans can be harnessed as a tool to enable those living in the community to live healthier lifestyles. In facilitating land use patterns and transportation infrastructure that promote health, an official plan will also be satisfying the Province's interest in achieving healthy, liveable and safe communities as reflected in the Provincial Policy Statement.

Study Purpose

Recognizing the role an official plan can play in guiding development towards results that increase individuals' participation in healthy, active living, this report examines the City of Kingston's Official Plan to determine its effectiveness in facilitating initiatives, and ultimately developments, that are conducive to healthy living. The twin objectives of this study are therefore:

1. To determine whether, and how, healthy community concepts are articulated within the Official Plan; and
2. To assess the extent to which healthy community concepts within the Official Plan are reflected in city projects and general planning dialogue.

Methods

In order to identify the presence and absence of healthy community concepts within the Official Plan, a Healthy Community Checklist was employed and served as a type of *direct content analysis*. While this tool contains 24 unique items, there are five overarching principles of planning for a healthy community that structure the Checklist. These principles include 1) bicycle and pedestrian accessibility; 2) complete streets principles; 3) parks and open space; 4) compact and mixed-use development; and 5) convenient access to healthy food.

To build on this approach, a *latent content analysis* was used to critically examine the language used to convey healthy community principles. Particular attention was paid to *semantics*, inasmuch as not only were the number and type of words used of interest, but also how effective those words may be.

Finally, two in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a planner and councilor at the City to examine the degree to which they think the Official Plan's vision and policies are being reflected in projects, plans, priorities and general planning dialogue.

Findings

Results from the Healthy Community Checklist reveal that Kingston's Official Plan contains a significant number of healthy community concepts. Seldom do the goals and

objectives explicitly intend to achieve a healthier community or improved quality of life for people, however the policies have the potential to achieve these results.

Results from the latent content analysis suggest that many community goals are articulated in a manner that is meaningful and substantial. Pedestrian and bicycle accessibility, the conservation and enhancement of open space, complete streets objectives as well as mixed and compact development goals are communicated using meaningful language. Improving access to healthy foods is not as powerfully conveyed through Official Plan policies.

Results from the interviews suggest that Kingston has made progress in facilitating more health-friendly built environments, as seen for example in the re-development of Lake Ontario Park, an anticipated high-speed transit system, and an expected bicycle lane in the Williamsville Street corridor. Despite these achievements, interviews also revealed a number of challenges to implementing healthy community concepts found in the Official Plan, including a lack of resources, developer resistance, limitations to retrofitting the design of older neighbourhoods, occasional opposition to healthy community interventions (e.g. community gardens), and having an outdated zoning by-law.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Results indicate that the goals and policies found in Kingston's Official Plan contain a significant number of healthy community principles. What is less evident is the extent to which these concepts are being translated into City projects and private developments. It is important to note that the current Official Plan was last amended in 2010. Thus, the effects of policies that support health friendly development may not yet be apparent. Nonetheless, as health community

planning continues to gain consideration and as Kingston strives to be Canada's most sustainable city, critically examining the policies that guide development in this city, is essential.

In recognizing the challenges to implementing healthy community concepts within the official plan, a number of recommendations were made including the need to more explicitly