

## **Smart Growth promotes healthier communities, BC study shows**

Researchers have found that the implementing the principles of smart growth in city and town development promotes healthier communities.

Smart Growth BC, an organization devoted to fiscally, social and environmentally responsible land use and development, released a study, “Promoting Public Health Through Smart Growth” in March of this year.

“Research shows that all else being equal, residents of smart growth communities walk and bike more and drive less than residents of more isolated, auto-dependent locations,” the study states. The result is measurably better physical fitness, reduced likelihood of obesity and traffic crash risk and fewer air pollutants per capita.

“The three most important factors linked to increased walking were density, land use mix and connectivity,” says Cheeying Ho, the executive director of Smart Growth BC, and one of the researchers for the study.

High-density communities have built in previously developed areas and made better use of urban space.

Land use mix is a feature of development that mixes residential and commercial elements in a compact area.

Connectivity refers to providing varied transportation options and infrastructure for walking, bicycling, car pooling, car sharing, scooters, public transit and others.

Researchers for the study found that simply implementing more of these features in existing communities, as well as in the development of new areas, leads to an

increase in activity levels of residents. This remains true even when taking into account personal preferences, the study shows.

“People who prefer a more walkable environment will be more active in environments that support walking than those that prefer auto-oriented environments or sprawl. However, even those that prefer sprawl will walk more if they are in a walkable environment,” the study states. “Furthermore, recent evidence of latent demand for more walkable environments suggests that simply accommodating the existing demand would allow those who are currently located in auto-oriented environments to choose a more walkable one.”

The study drew from various reports on activity levels and other health-related phenomena, including ratio of vehicle collisions and air pollutants, in sprawl areas versus more compact communities. It referred to a Seattle report which found that a quartile increase in residential density corresponded with a 23 per cent increase in the odds of walking for non-work travel. Walking for non-work trips increased 19 per cent with each quartile increase in the number of retail establishments, according to a King County 2005 study.

In 2003 about 15 per cent of Canadians were considered obese and a full third were classified as overweight. Diseases associated with sedentary lifestyles are among the leading causes of disability and death. It has been shown that regular, life-long physical activity can help increase overall wellness and reduce illnesses. Even modest increases in physical activity tend to reduce mortality.

“People need to understand the connection between the built environment and physical activity and health, and the fact that most people can meet their daily required exercise by walking to their daily needs,” says Ho.

Smart growth communities “build the opportunity to be physically active into daily routines through active transportation and access to recreational opportunities” and are the “most effective way to improve community fitness,” according to the BC study.

The study concludes with some strategies to help various levels of government implement smart growth principles in city and town planning.

Ho says there is also a significant role of citizen engagement in lobbying for development that follows smart growth principles.

“People need to get engaged in visioning, planning and development processes. They need to demand more compact, walkable, mixed use communities,” she says. “Connectivity is especially important for children and elderly people, who need to be able to access destinations more easily and without a car. Citizens can also get their health practitioners more engaged in the community planning process and encourage health agencies and transportation agencies to communicate/coordinate.”

[Read the full study here.](#)