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Improving Health by Design in the Greater Toronto-Hamilton Area

Improving Health by Design in the Greater Toronto-Hamilton Area (GTHA) is a report that was co-authored by the Medical Officers of Health for Toronto, Peel Region, Simcoe Muskoka and Hamilton. It describes why we need major changes in how we design communities.

Specifically, creating communities that support greater walking, cycling and public transit use would improve the public's health by building physical activity back into people's lives and reducing air pollution. The report estimates that increases in physical activity would prevent over 180 premature deaths each year and prevent over 1,000 cases of diabetes a year in the GTHA. Reduction in traffic-related air pollution would prevent an additional 154 premature deaths each year.

Recommendations:

1. Invest in public transit

Investments need to be made in public transit that will encourage greater use by making it more convenient, reliable and accessible across the GTHA. In addition to reducing congestion, reducing air pollution and providing a lower cost transportation option, taking public transit incorporates physical activity into a person's day. For example, 29% of public transit users in the US achieve the recommended 30 minutes a day of daily physical activity just by their transit use.

Leadership and collaboration is needed between federal, provincial and municipal governments to foster a network of transit and 'active' transportation alternatives that cross city boundaries and link the municipalities of the GTHA. Metrolinx's *The Big Move* is an example of a visionary transit plan that can have a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of GTHA residents. It would see new transportation projects amounting to 2 billion dollars in investment annually over the next 25 years including over 1,200 km of additional rapid transit and over 7,000 km of new pathways and trails for pedestrians and cyclists.

2. Strengthen provincial policies that support transit and "active" transportation

Healthy, complete communities' support, by design, walking, cycling and transit use providing access to a range of housing, retail, services and employment. Several provincial laws, policies and plans direct or influence how communities are designed. These need to further strengthen their support for the development of healthy, complete communities.

For example, *Places to Grow* is a key long-range plan for the GTHA to revitalize downtowns, create complete communities, curb urban sprawl and reduce congestion by supporting a greater range of transportation options. The plan has existed for almost 10 years and is subject to review in the near future providing an opportunity to identify how it can more strongly support the development of healthy complete communities.

3. Make transit and "active" transportation planning integral to city planning

When communities are developed, plans for water, sewage, roads and utilities automatically occur. In order to achieve healthy complete communities, the planning for walking, cycling and transit use also needs to become routine throughout city planning steps. If the planning for active transportation and transit use is addressed as an exception to be accommodated as an afterthought or only for recreational purposes, then the potential health and other benefits will not be realized.

When people use public transit it is possible to get 30 minutes of exercise each day. Whether it is walking or cycling back and forth to the bus stop or climbing the stairs in the subway. This is what is meant by "active" transportation.

Current Challenges Linked to Urban Sprawl:

- Obesity and inactivity cost \$4 billion a year in the GTHA
- Diabetes rates are rising rapidly with over 12,500 new cases occurring each year due to inactivity
- Traffic congestion in the GTHA has resulted in the longest commute times in Canada, with economic cost of \$6 billion in lost productivity each year
- Traffic related air pollution is responsible for over 850 premature deaths a year and over 3,300 hospitalizations
- Communities are built around the automobile eliminating regular physical activity from people's lives such as walking to school or the 'corner' store or accessing frequent convenient transit service.

Risks of Expected Growth in the GTHA:

- Over the next 20 years the population in the GTHA is projected to grow by over 2 million people
- If we do not change how we design communities and transportation systems, the current issues outlined above will get much worse
 - A 33% increase in commute times
 - A 200% increase in economic costs of lost productivity due to congestion
 - A 27% increase in small particulate air pollution from traffic emissions
 - A 30% increase in greenhouse gas emissions from traffic
 - Nearly double the amount of diabetes with one in six adults being affected.