

## **Suburban design can make you sick**

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It's you, a chirpy radio deejay and about 300,000 other vehicles.

For most Calgarians, the daily commute means a solitary drive on clogged roads. It's stressful, and according to health and urban planning experts, Calgary's suburb-dominated design could even make you sick.

Smog and automobile emissions contribute to asthma, lung disease and allergies. But hours spent in vehicles, instead of running shoes, may be even more dangerous than that, says Dara Finney, active transportation co-ordinator with Go for Green -- a non-governmental organization funded by Health Canada.

"We're building our communities for cars," says Finney. "Yes, air pollution costs us, but physical inactivity is what's killing us."

According to the Alberta Centre for Active Living, the direct health-care costs of Canadian physical inactivity totalled \$2.1 billion in 1999. Inadequate physical activity translates into 21,340 premature deaths each year -- or 10.3 per cent of all adult deaths.

In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has launched Active Community Environments -- a campaign promoting urban design that encourages, not discourages physical activity.

Creating neighbourhoods with nearby services and employment opportunities is part of that equation.

"If you're trying to get people to use any other form of transportation than a car, you have to keep it within a 30-minute circle," says Finney

Studies show most North Americans will tolerate daily travel up to a half-hour -- a duration that matches recommended daily exercise times, Finney says. With time and distance as the two most commonly cited barriers to activity, a commute by bike, foot or in-line skates achieves two goals at once.

Even for commuters who can't abandon their automobile, neighbourhoods planned with multi-use zoning can yield great results, Finney says.

"You need to allow the corner stores to come in. You need to allow the mini parks to come in. Nobody walks from nowhere to nowhere."

In Calgary, city planner Richard Parker says people can easily walk to the bus.

The city has a long-standing plan to situate every house within 400 metres of a transit stop. Our scenic, riverside pathways are another urban achievement, says Parker, who is the city's general manager of transportation and planning policy.

"We have one of the biggest cycle path systems in North America," he says.

Calgary is also increasing its housing density. In the 1960s, '70s and '80s, the city averaged two units per hectare. Now we're up to about three per hectare. It may not sound like change, Parker says, but, "in percentage terms, it's getting close to a much greater mix of housing types."

Instead of legislating mixed-use and high-density planning, Calgary is committed to choice, Parker says. People can pick a dense, walkable inner-city community like Kensington, or live in northwest Royal Oak and still enjoy access to roads, pathways and transit.

"A healthy city is one that provides options for people," Parker says.

Improving our urban health may also be tied to details. Baby steps can include upping bicycle parking in front of new buildings and ensuring sidewalks are complete. Even keeping parks and recreation facilities open on civic holidays can help, Parker says.

But getting people out of their vehicles comes with one major snag:

"We are a city that likes our automobiles -- there's absolutely no question about that."

People need to understand their four-wheel love affair comes at a price, says Finney. Traffic upgrades such as Calgary's massive interchange projects should require not only environmental impact studies, but health assessments.

Health effects depend on what you measure, says Parker. The city currently plans for pedestrian access on major projects and examines how traffic changes will affect alternative transportation access. The suspended pedestrian bridge below the Stoney Trail extension is one example of prioritizing more than automobiles, Parker says.

The Calgary Health Region also provides input in planning processes from empty lot redevelopments to pesticides to suburban structure.

Most consultation involves enforcing the Canada Health Act, says John Pelton, director of environmental health for the CHR. Insufficient traffic corridors are one of the city's problems, he says, but physical inactivity has multiple roots.

"I think there's more public awareness of it now. But what are the culprits?"

For example, television could be implicated in childhood obesity alongside hostile streets. The factors are complex, says Pelton.

Land use patterns do affect children, Finney says.

Children experience detrimental effects when they don't walk, bike or even take a bus to school, says Finney.

"They're being imprinted that the only way to get from A to B is in the car."

Fact box:

- In 1999, the direct health care costs of physical inactivity in Canada totalled \$2.1 billion.
- A 10 per cent reduction in physical inactivity could reduce direct health-care costs in Canada by \$150 million a year.
- Inadequate physical activity results in 21,340 premature deaths every year.
- Physical inactivity is as much a public health threat as smoking.

Source: Alberta Centre for Active Living