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Key stakeholder perspectives on the development of walkable neighbourhoods

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ABSTRACT

Evidence supports the link between the built environment and physical activity. This study investigated factors that influence the decisions made by key stakeholders as they relate to neighbourhood development. Seventeen stakeholders including public health and municipal employees ($n = 9$), city councillors ($n = 3$), and the private sector (e.g., land developers, food retailers) ($n = 5$), participated in interviews. Private sector participants considered healthy lifestyle choices (e.g., PA) to be related more to individual choice than did other groups. All groups agreed that consumer behaviour is essential to invoking change but did not agree on who is responsible for invoking change. Common barriers included financial costs, car dependency, and social norms. Facilitators included growing awareness of health and environmental issues and increasing buy-in from governing bodies for innovative neighbourhood development. More work is needed that acknowledges the differences between while integrating the diverse perspectives of those responsible for the planning of neighbourhoods that are conducive for physical activity.

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1. Background

Growing evidence supports the link between the built environment, food security, and obesogenic-related factors such as physical inactivity (Ewing et al., 2003; Martin and Ferris, 2007; Saelens et al., 2003; van der Horst et al., 2006). For instance, people living in neighbourhoods with high population or housing density, street connectivity, and walking infrastructure engage in walking and cycling activities more (Saelens et al., 2003) and have lower rates of obesity than do people who live in lower density, residential-only neighbourhoods (e.g., Brownson et al., 2005; Frank et al., 2006; Spence et al., 2008). Due to such evidence, city planning and public health officials are paying increased attention to environmental determinants of healthy behaviours such as walking. Focus is also shifting towards food security, which is

defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (2007) as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life”. Although food security is related to individual and household income, environmental determinants can support and facilitate access to affordable and healthy food.

Efforts to create ‘walkable’ neighbourhoods are often propelled by the ‘Smart Growth’ movement. This movement started as a reaction to the undesirable features of urban sprawl and advocates for limiting outward urban expansion and increasing density, allowing for more mixed land uses and walkability, putting the cost on the consumer, emphasizing public transit, and the revitalization of older neighbourhoods (Downs, 2005). However, Downs points out that Smart Growth means different things to different people. For example, he contends that developers tend to play down the limitations of outward growth whereas some urban planners and environmentalists accept Smart Growth principles *prima facie*. Further, the Smart Growth movement can be considered through the lens of ‘automobility,’ which brings together ideas of the car as: a manufactured item, the major item of individual consumption and subsequent resource use, a complex notion interlacing industry, land-use, and globalization, the predominant form of mobility which subordinates other forms (e.g., walking) and the dominant symbol of the ‘good life’ (Urry, 2004). Thus, “automobility necessarily divides workplaces from

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the home producing lengthy commutes; it splits home and shopping and destroys local retailing outlets” (Urry, 2000, p. 59)—trends that Smart Growth proponents aim to counter.

One of the less universally embraced Smart Growth principles is the idea of creating more affordable housing (Downs, 2005). Linking housing to walkability principles is necessary as it has been shown that living in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods is associated with less overall physical activity (Janssen et al., 2006; Kavanagh et al., 2005) and greater risk for being overweight or obese (Drewnowski et al., 2007; Janssen et al., 2006, Wang et al., 2007). Similarly, residents of lower socio-economic status (SES) neighbourhoods have greater access to fast foods and lower access to grocery stores (Hemphill et al., 2008; Smoyer-Tomic et al., 2008). This may be due to the disappearance of small, full-range grocery stores from town centres and consumers’ increased willingness to travel greater distances to grocery stores with a wider range of goods at lower cost (White, 2007). Lopez and Hynes (2006) have referred to low rates of physical activity and high rates of obesity in low-income urban areas despite mixed-use environments with high street connectivity as the inner-city paradox. They argue that this conflicting relationship is likely due to a mix of land-use, social, and infrastructure issues. For example poverty (social), abandoned buildings (land-use), and lack of adequate street lighting (infrastructure) combine to make walking a challenge for residents. Indeed, this argument is supported by the findings of other researchers who showed that although low- and high-SES economic neighbourhoods provided equal access to sidewalks and recreational facilities, low-SES residents were less frequently active and reported their neighbourhoods were less pleasant, had greater numbers of unattended dogs, higher crime rates, and less trustworthy neighbours than did individuals in high SES neighbourhoods (Wilson et al., 2004).

Planning policies and practices such as infrastructure investment and zoning can have an effect on urban form features such as density and land use mix (Frumkin et al., 2004). Raine et al. (2008) highlighted that the relationship between healthy weights and urban environments is very complex and that there is a need for coordination of independent policy responses across a range of sectors. However, as pointed out by Yancey et al. (2007), influencing legislation as a means of changing environments to positively impact physical activity has yet to become a part of health policy in any meaningful way. Edwards and Tsouros (2006) suggest strategies to overcome this gap, which include ensuring that planning, transport, and economic development agencies work together when designing new areas or working on infill in already established urban areas. Such approaches should include reorienting community design to favour walking and cycling over cars and to locate services so that they are easily accessible by walking or cycling. However, public health advocates need to approach both the private sector and governments prepared with answers to questions such as who is going to pay for changes (Ashe et al., 2007).

Historically, Canadian legislators did not believe that government should have a major role in encouraging people to be physically active or to maintain a healthy diet (Ashley et al., 2001). These beliefs may be changing as reflected by recent government initiatives to promote physical activity through the provision of tax credits for children’s involvement in organized physical activity (Government of Canada, 2007). Hollander et al. (2008) reported that in the United States, planners and city and county elected and appointed officials considered physical activity to be important in their work. Participants (who were members of professional organizations) cited inadequate funding, lack of knowledge, too few staff resources, and lack of political support as major barriers to their work. Participants also expressed an

interest in more cross-discipline communication and dialogue. Research is needed that reflects the knowledge, voices, and perspectives of the diverse public and private stakeholders responsible for the development and planning of neighbourhoods, particularly in other political contexts than the United States. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine the factors that influence the professional decisions made by key stakeholders involved in the planning and development of neighbourhoods in one Canadian city and to gain insight into their perceptions about what factors might facilitate and inhibit physical activity and food security.

This research was guided by the Ecological Model of Physical Activity (EMPA; Spence and Lee, 2003), which examines the interplay between biological (e.g., current level of fitness), psychological (e.g., efficacy) and extra-individual factors (e.g., the built environment) and their influence on behaviour. The model identifies macrosystem (e.g., societal values), exosystem (e.g., workplace support), mesosystem (e.g., parental support for children’s physical activity), and microsystem (e.g., verbal encouragement) dimensions that can influence physical activity. Of particular relevance to this research, the EMPA posits that there is a reciprocal relationship between physical ecology (e.g., climate) and pressures from urbanization and macrosystem factors such as societal values and safe neighbourhoods. These can directly influence physical activity behaviour or can exert influence when mediated through individual attitudes. The interaction between urbanization, societal values, and the construction of our cities resonates with automobility and Smart Growth. As such, the EMPA can provide a useful framework for exploring the relationship between the built environment and physical activity. While the EMPA does not address food security, the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) that inform it can. Further, the food security aspect of this study was exploratory as food security in relation to the built environment has received much less research attention to date and while related to Smart Growth principles, is not a central component of Smart Growth.

2. Methods

2.1. Setting

The city of Edmonton is the capital of the Western Canadian province of Alberta. It covers an area of 684 km² and has a population of 752,412 (City of Edmonton, 2008), making it one of the lowest population densities for a large major city in North America. Half of all homes are single-detached houses (City of Edmonton, 2008). Edmonton experiences a northern continental climate with extreme seasonal temperatures and average daily temperatures ranging from –11.7 °C (10.9 °F) in January to 17.5 °C (63.5 °F) in July (Environment Canada, 2004). The city is a government centre and boasts one of Canada’s largest research-intensive universities. It is also the centre for the oil and gas industry and economic development for northern and central Alberta. Despite the apparent focus on oil and gas, Edmonton’s economy is now the second-most diverse in Canada (Edmonton Economic Development Corporation, 2007). The city enjoyed an economic ‘boom’ in the late 1990s and early 2000s sparked by a recovery in oil prices, however, along with the rest of the world, and reflecting the change in oil prices, the economy is now declining. About 55.4% of adults are sufficiently active to achieve health benefits (Loitz et al., 2009). In relation to car use, 77% of Edmontonians make all their trips by car; in high-density neighbourhoods only 58% did, compared to 80% in the lowest density neighbourhoods (Turcotte, 2008).

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