

Building Community Leadership for a Healthier Toronto

Steve Barnes



November, 2012

The Wellesley Institute engages in research, policy and community mobilization to advance population health

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10 Alcorn Ave, Suite 300
Toronto, ON, Canada M4V 3B2
416.972.1010



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Executive Summary

The places in which we live, work, and play affect our health. Neighbourhoods that have options for active transportation like walking and cycling, opportunities for physical activity like recreation centres, green spaces to be active and socialize in, and places to access healthy and nutritious food, tend to have greater opportunities for good health.

But not every neighbourhood in Toronto incorporates these health-promoting features. Neighbourhoods that are better off tend to have more opportunities for good health than poorer neighbourhoods. Lower income neighbourhoods are more likely to lack opportunities for physical activity and have fewer green spaces and places to buy good food than neighbourhoods that are better off. As a result, people living in lower income neighbourhoods have fewer opportunities for good health.

Many of the challenges that Toronto faces in improving its built environment require leadership at various levels of government. There are, however, many improvements that can occur within communities, if they are supported to take leadership roles.

To facilitate these kinds of partnerships, we need dedicated staff that bridge the gaps between decision makers and communities. Community animators — people who support community leaders and act as catalysts, relationship-builders, supporters, and mentors for local projects and initiatives — are a proven way to bring ideas and neighbourhoods together and to make improvements to the built environment.

In the Toronto 2013-2014 budget, we urge the City of Toronto to:

1. Establish a new built environment community leadership development program;
2. Ensure stable funding of at least \$735,000 per annum to allow to program to employ nine animators, including a mix of regional and specialist animators, to coordinate the community leadership development program;
3. Consider providing funding that would allow the built environment community leadership development program to employ additional specialist animators to work with communities and populations with unique needs, such as immigrant-receiving communities and neighbourhoods that lack access to green spaces.

The built environment has significant impacts on our health and the health of Toronto's communities. Ensuring equitable access to spaces for physical activity, active transportation, and green spaces can have positive health impacts for communities across the city. Fostering community leadership is one critical tool in enabling communities to identify and lead projects in their own neighbourhoods that improve the built environment and residents' health. Having dedicated staff to support community leadership has proved to be successful in Toronto, and Council should ensure that this model is supported in the long-term.

Introduction

The places in which we live, work, and play have significant impacts on our health. This paper sets out policies that could be implemented in Toronto's 2013 budget that will enhance our health by supporting community-led initiatives to improve our city's built environment.

The built environment:

“includes our homes, schools, workplaces, parks/recreation areas business areas and roads. It extends overhead in the form of electric transmission lines, underground in the form of waste disposal sites and subway trains, and across the country in the form of highways. The built environment encompasses all buildings, spaces and products that are created or modified by people. It impacts indoor and outdoor physical environments (e.g. climatic conditions and indoor/outdoor air quality), as well as social environments (e.g. civic participation, community capacity and investment) and subsequently our health and quality of life.”¹

The built environment includes the aspects of our neighbourhood and communities with which we interact in our day-to-day lives and presents opportunities and limitations for physical activity, active transportation, and access to green spaces, all of which have health impacts.

Built Environment And Physical Activity

It is well established that physical activity contributes to good health. Public parks and recreation facilities support physical activity in neighbourhoods. Research shows that access to these facilities are more important to populations who are more likely to lack other opportunities and resources to be physically active, such as new immigrants, racialized populations, people with low income, and people with disabilities.² As a result, they play an important role in health promotion and enhancing health equity.³

Not every neighbourhood incorporates opportunities for residents to be physically active. Access to health-promoting aspects of the built environment tends to reflect neighbourhood income. Neighbourhoods with higher socioeconomic status tend to have more features that encourage physical activity than poorer neighbourhoods.⁴ Barriers such as user fees at recreation centres can also reduce access to physical activity for low-income families who are less likely to have opportunities to participate in recreational sports.⁵

This is of great importance in Canada, where nearly half of the Canadian population aged 12 and older and physically inactive. Children are also particularly affected: in 2004, 26 percent of Canadian children and adolescents aged 2-17 were overweight or obese.⁶ Childhood obesity can contribute to a lifetime of poor health, such as heart

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- 1 Shobha Srinivasan, Liam R. O'Fallon & Allen Deary, 'Creating Healthy Communities, Healthy Homes, Healthy People: Initiating a Research Agenda on the Built Environment and Public Health', *American Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 93, No. 9, September 2003, p. 1446.
 - 2 W.C. Taylor, T. Baranowski, & D.R. Young, 'Physical activity interventions in low-income, ethnic minority, and populations with disability', *American Journal Of Preventive Medicine*, 1998. Vol. 15, No. 4, pp. 334-343; Mark S. Tremblay, Shirley N. Bryan, Claudio E. Perez, Chris I. Ardern & Peter T. Katzmarzyk, 'Physical activity and immigrant status: evidence from the Canadian Community Health Survey', *Canadian Journal Of Public Health*, Vol. 97, No. 4, 2006, pp. 277-282.
 - 3 James F. Sallis, Myron F. Floyd, Daniel A. Rodriguez & Brian E. Saelens, 'Role of Built Environments in Physical Activity, Obesity, and Cardiovascular Disease', *Circulation*, Vol. 125, No. 5, p. 730; Toronto Public Health, *Improving Health and Health Equity through the Toronto Parks Plan*, November 3, 2011. <http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2011/hl/bgrd/backgroundfile-42233.pdf>.
 - 4 Kim D. Raine, *Overweight and Obese in Canada: A Population Health Perspective*, Canada Institute for Health Information, 2004, pp. 35-36.
 - 5 Raine, *Overweight and Obese in Canada: A Population Health Perspective*, p. 35.
 - 6 Ontario Ministry of Health Promotion, *Child Health Guidance Document*, May 2010, p.23.

disease, stroke, osteoarthritis, some cancers, and depression.⁷ It is estimated that if the current childhood obesity rates persist, children will live three to four years less than today's adults due to obesity.⁸

Built Environment And Active Transportation

A critical enabler of physical activity and health is neighbourhoods that enable and encourage active transportation: neighbourhoods that are walkable, are bicycle-friendly, and have good transit connections. These kinds of neighbourhoods allow people to be physically active while getting from place to place. On the other hand, neighbourhoods that are designed primarily for private vehicles are often disconnected from transit, distant from the locations that residents travel to (for example, their workplace), and sometimes lack essential infrastructure like sidewalks. These built environment factors encourage increased use of vehicles, even for short trips, and less physical activity.

Research shows that children tend to be less physically active in neighbourhoods that are designed primarily for vehicles and often lack sidewalks, thereby reducing walkability. These neighbourhoods also tend to lack safe outdoor spaces for children to play.⁹

There are clear connections between the access communities have to green spaces and both physical and mental health. Having access to green spaces can improve our health, and their absence can harm it. Easy access to green spaces promotes physical activity, which helps to promote and maintain good health. Living in areas that have green spaces within walking distance can lead to increased physical activity, reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, and increased longevity.¹⁰ Moreover, death rates from circulatory diseases, like heart disease, are lower amongst people who live in areas with the greatest amount of green spaces.¹¹ Urban green spaces can also reduce the chances of people who are obese developing some diseases, such as hypertension, osteoarthritis, sleep apnea, and stroke.¹² Contact with the physical environment can also help to relieve stress.¹³

Built Environment And Heat Islands

Lack of green space in urban communities may affect health in unanticipated ways. The health of all Torontonians is compromised by the urban heat island effect — an increase in urban temperatures caused by a lack of permeable surfaces. The average difference in surface temperatures between developed and rural areas is 10 to 15°C during the day and 5 to 10°C at night.¹⁴ Excessive heat is linked to poor health, including increased emergency admissions, breathing problems, and higher rates of mortality.¹⁵ Temperatures can

7 Ontario Ministry of Health Promotion, *Child Health Guidance Document*, pp. 20-21; Public Health Agency of Canada, *Obesity in Canada: Snapshot*, 2009, p. 5.

8 Ontario Ministry of Health Promotion, *Child Health Guidance Document*, p.22.

9 A.S. Bierman, A. Johns, B. Hyndman, C. Mitchell, N. Degani, A.R. Shack, M.I. Creatore, A.K. Lofters, M.L. Urquia, F. Ahmad, N. Khanlou & V. Parlette, 'Social Determinants of Health and Populations at Risk', in A.S. Bierman (editor), *Project for an Ontario Women's Health Evidence-Based Report: Volume 2*: Toronto, 2012, p. 29.

10 Sandro Galea; David Vlahov, 'Urban Health: Evidence, Challenges, and Directions', *Annual Review of Public Health*, Vol. 26, April 2005, pp. 341-365

11 R. Mitchell & F. Popham, 'Effect of exposure to natural environment on health inequalities: an observational population study', *The Lancet* Vol. 372, No. 9650, 2006, pp. 1655-1660.

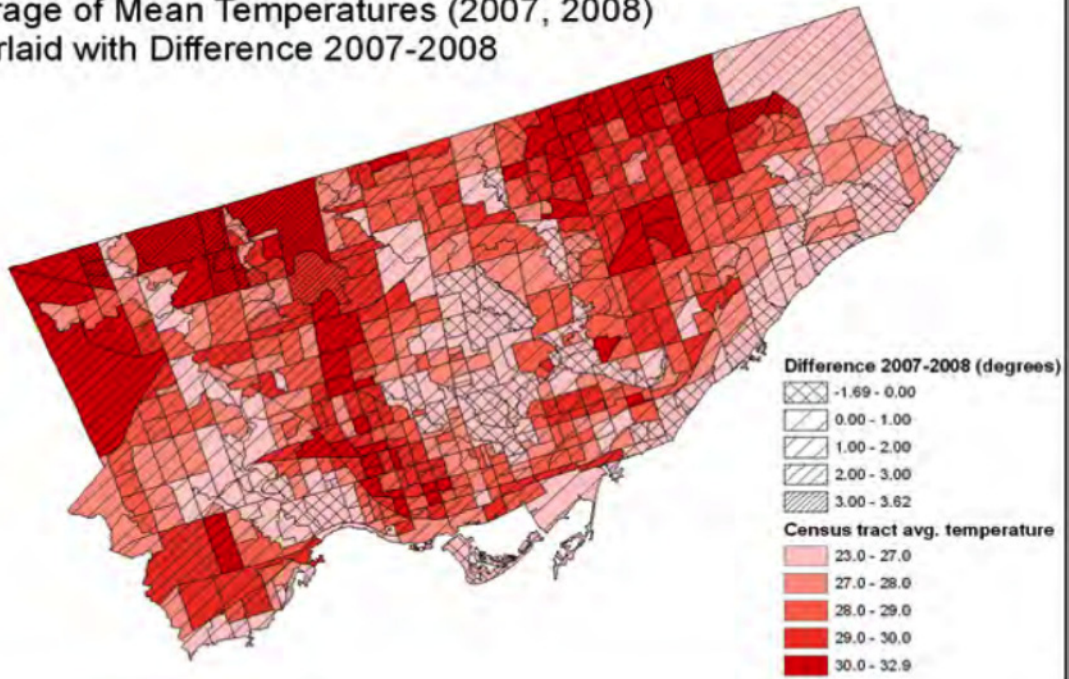
12 Margalit Younger, Heather R. Morrow-Almeida, Stephen M. Vindigni, Andrew L. Dannenberg, 'The Built Environment, Climate Change, and Health: Opportunities for Co-Benefits', *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, Vol. 35, No. 5, November 2008, pp. 517-526.

13 Gary W. Evans, 'The Built Environment and Mental Health', *Journal of Urban Health*, Vol. 80, No. 4, December 2003, p. 545.

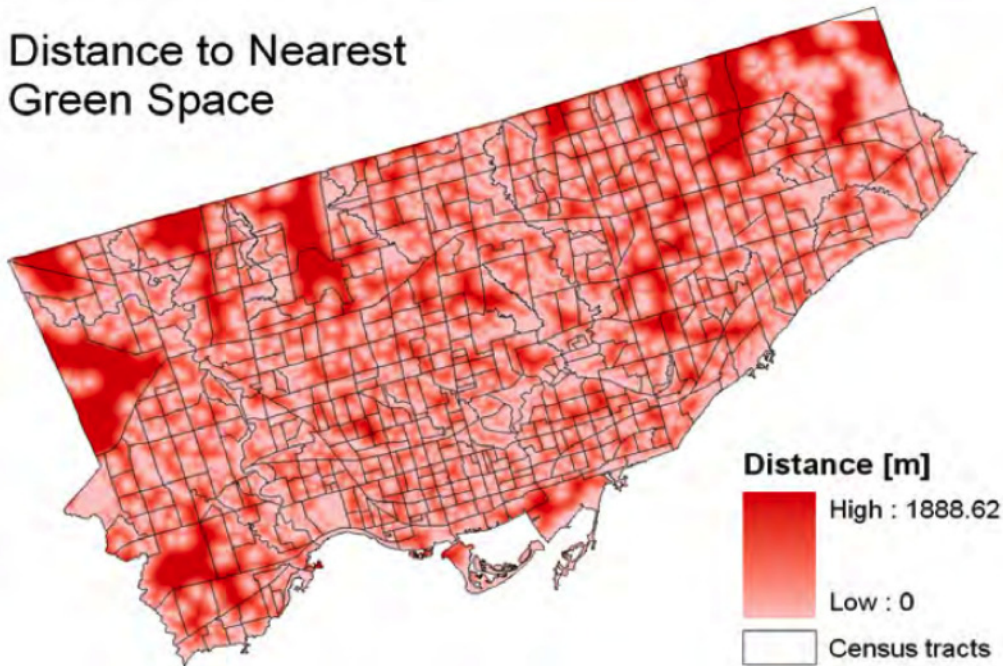
14 Environmental Protection Agency, *Reducing Urban Heat Islands: Compendium of Strategies*, pp. 1-6. <http://www.epa.gov/hiri/resources/pdf/BasicsCompendium.pdf>.

15 R. Sari Kovats & Shakoor Hajat, 'Heat Stress and Public Health: A Critical Review', *Annual Review of Public Health*, Vol. 29, 2008, pp. 41-55.

Average of Mean Temperatures (2007, 2008)
Overlaid with Difference 2007-2008

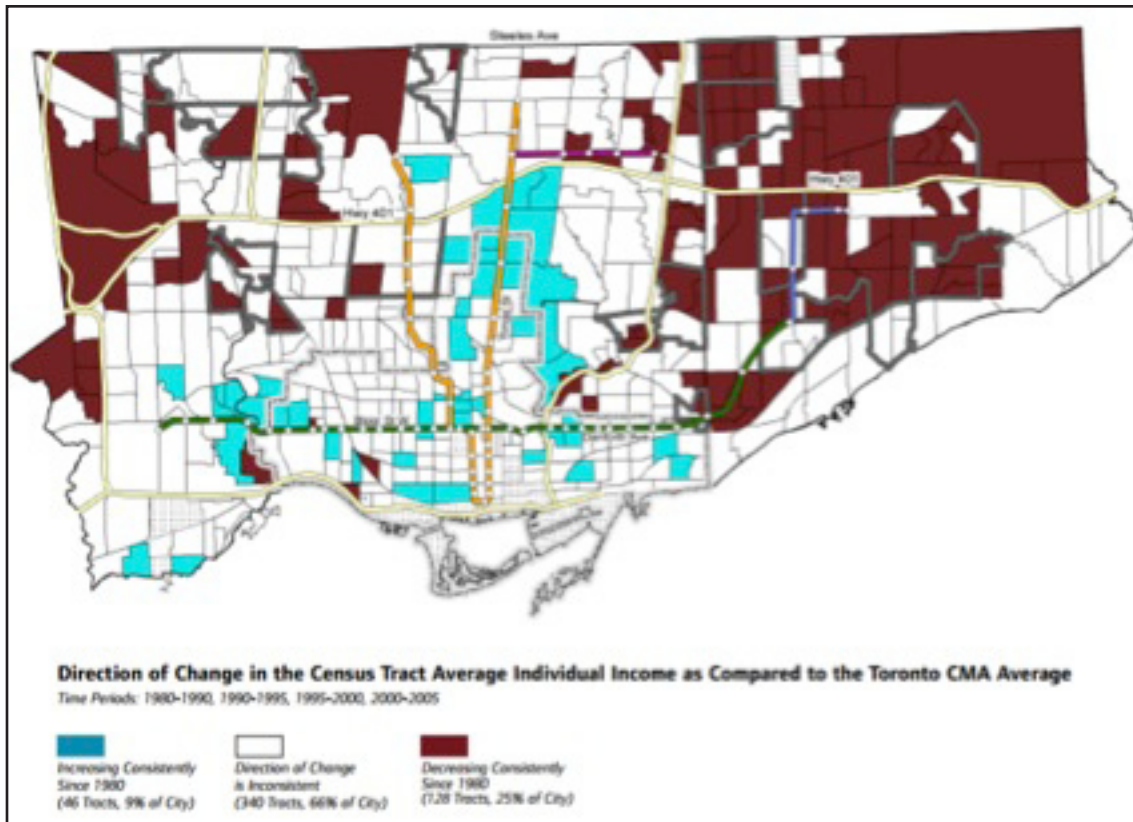


Distance to Nearest
Green Space



Toronto Public Health, *Implementation of a Map-Based Heat Vulnerability Assessment and Decision Support System: Final Project Report and Map Series*, March 2011.

http://www.toronto.ca/health/hphe/air_quality/pdf/implementation_mapping_heat_vulnerability.pdf



J. David Hulchanski, *The Three Cities Within Toronto: Income Polarization Among Toronto's Neighbourhoods, 1970-2005*, 2010. <http://www.urbancentre.utoronto.ca/pdfs/curp/tnrn/Three-Cities-Within-Toronto-2010-Final.pdf>

be lowered, and adverse health outcomes can be avoided, by expanding and enhancing green spaces in the city, planting more trees and vegetation, and reducing the prevalence of hard surfaces.¹⁶

Low income neighbourhoods often have less access green spaces and are therefore particularly affected by urban heat. Moreover, a lack of financial resources also makes residents in these neighbourhoods less likely to have cooling options, like air conditioning. In Toronto, areas of the city that have the highest average temperatures also tend to have the greatest distance to green space, as demonstrated by the two maps from Toronto Public

¹⁶ The Clean Air Partnership, *Climate Change Adaptation Strategies for Toronto's Urban Forest*, 2007 p. iii. http://www.cleanairpartnership.org/pdf/climate_change_adaptation.pdf.

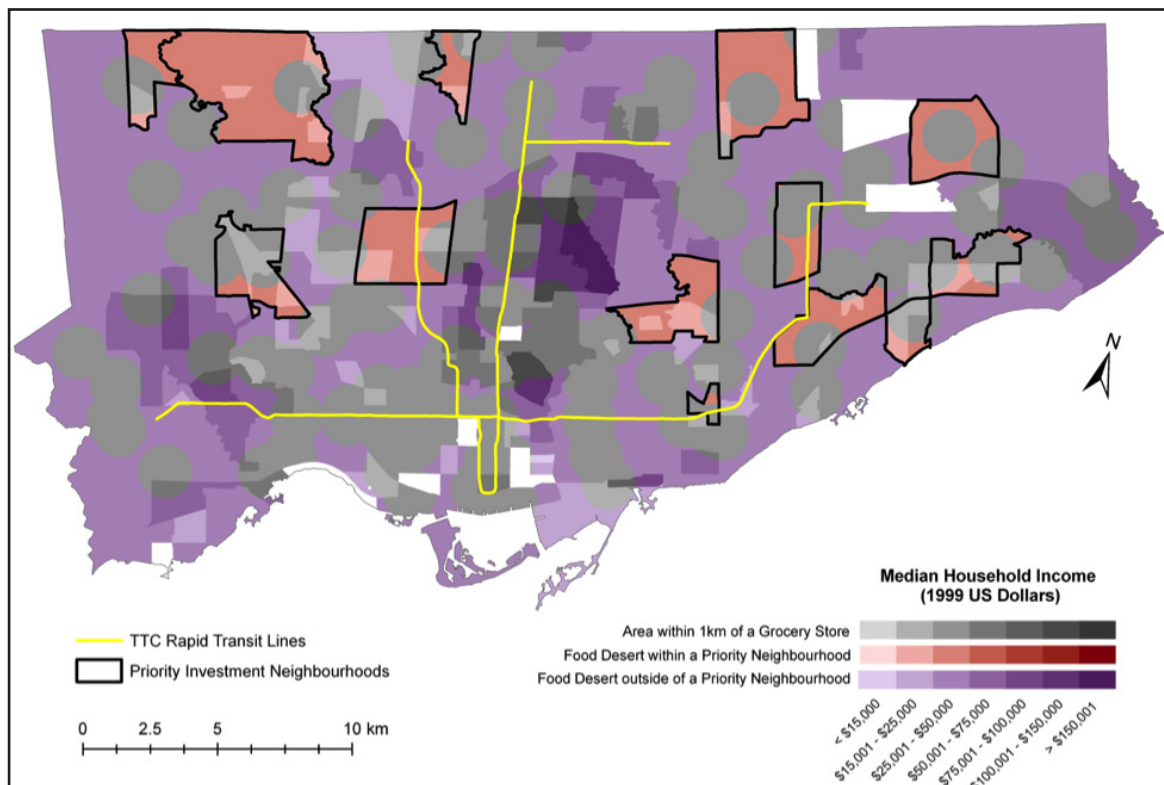
Health, above. Moreover, research by David Hulchanski shows that some of the hottest and least green areas of Toronto are amongst the areas of the city that have been getting consistently poorer since 1980.

Built Environment And Food Security

Food security can also be affected by the built environment. Being food secure means having physical, social, and economic access to sufficient food, having food that is safe and nutritious, and food that meets dietary needs and food preferences that allow for an active and healthy life.¹⁷

Food insecurity can contribute to serious physical and mental health issues, such as insomnia, chronic pain, stomach ulcers, depression, stress, anxiety disorders, and alcohol and drug abuse.¹⁸ Toronto Public Health reports that 10.8 percent of households in Toronto reported moderate or severe food insecurity,¹⁹ and the rate is even higher in urban Aboriginal populations.²⁰

Neighbourhood design can influence food security. Having access to grocery stores that sell healthy and affordable food within walking distance can improve food security. However, many low income neighbourhoods lack easy access to these stores and a lack of money or transit connections can make accessing healthy and affordable



17 Ashley F. Sullivan, Sunday Clark, Daniel J. Pallin & Carlos A. Camargo Jr., 'Food Security, Health, and Medication Expenditures of Emergency Department Patients', *The Journal of Emergency Medicine*, Vol. 38, No. 4, p. 524; Toronto Public Health, *Healthy Toronto by Design*, 2011, p. 18. http://www.toronto.ca/health/hphe/pdf/healthytoronto_oct04_11.pdf.

18 Sullivan et al, 'Food Security, Health, and Medication Expenditures of Emergency Department Patients', p. 526.

19 Toronto Public Health, *Healthy Toronto by Design*, p. 18

20 Toronto Public Health, *Cultivating Food Connections: Toward a Healthy & Sustainable Food System for Toronto*, May 2010, p. 3. [http://wx.toronto.ca/inter/health/food.nsf/Resources/340ACEEDBF1B2D6085257738000B22F2/\\$file/Cultivating%20Food%20Connections%20report.pdf](http://wx.toronto.ca/inter/health/food.nsf/Resources/340ACEEDBF1B2D6085257738000B22F2/$file/Cultivating%20Food%20Connections%20report.pdf).

food difficult. In Toronto, lower income areas of the city are more likely to be food deserts — neighbourhoods that lack easy access to healthy and affordable food — as shown by the map on page 6.

Neighbourhood food insecurity can be addressed through municipal planning policies that encourage grocery stores to establish themselves across the city. Residents can also be supported to grow and share food through allotment gardens, community kitchens, restaurants and food festivals.²¹

Built Environment And Community Connections

Neighbourhood design can have a significant impact on how people interact with one another, and neighbourhoods that have good access to green spaces also tend to facilitate more cohesive communities. People tend to have better mental health when they can make some decisions about their physical environment, for example, designing and maintaining garden spaces.²² But not all neighbourhoods are well-connected, and not everybody has access to green spaces. Living in an urban environment can reduce opportunities for people to connect with others in their neighbourhoods and communities, leading to anonymity, social isolation, and poor health.

But living in a big city does not have to translate into social isolation or unsafe neighbourhoods. The density and diversity of cities can provide opportunities for people to gather with others from their communities. Developing community networks can help newcomers to integrate into Canadian society and can provide an ongoing source of support for more established residents.²³ Urban areas can also provide opportunities for good health by including an array of spaces for social interaction, including small spaces for solitude, small group spaces, and larger and more public spaces.²⁴

Improvements To Toronto's Built Environment

In Toronto, there are numerous examples of improvements to the built environment that have improved access to physical activity, active transportation, and green spaces. The initiatives that the City has already undertaken can provide a model for future projects. We set out some promising policies and directions that have contributed to improving Toronto's built environment.

The City of Toronto has made progress in setting out plans to increase physical activity through changes to the built environment. City staff are currently developing a city-wide parks plan that makes improving the health of Torontonians a cornerstone.²⁵ The private sector has also supported active transportation options in recent years, with the introduction of Bixi bikes to Toronto. Making improvements to cycling infrastructure aids in positive developments like these.

The Toronto Pedestrian Charter, an initiative of the Toronto Pedestrian Committee, also sets out six principles to make the city pedestrian-friendly and to encourage active transportation: accessibility, equity, health and well-being, environmental sustainability, personal and community safety, and community cohesion and vitality.²⁶ This laid the groundwork for the Toronto Walking Strategy, which was adopted in 2009. The Walking Strategy sets out the City's priorities and actions for improving walkability and includes a focus on enhancing the walkability

21 Toronto Public Health, *Cultivating Food Connections*, p. 14.

22 Evans, 'The Built Environment and Mental Health', p. 544.

23 Chief Public Health Officer, *The Chief Public Health Officer's Report on the State of Public Health in Canada 2008: Addressing Health Inequalities, 2008*. <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/cphorsphc-respcacsp/2008/fr-rc/pdf/CPHO-Report-e.pdf>.

24 Evans, 'The Built Environment and Mental Health', pp. 536-537

25 See <http://www.toronto.ca/parks/engagement/parksplan/index.htm> and Toronto Public Health, *Improving Health and Health Equity through the Toronto Parks Plan*, November 2011. <http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2011/hl/bgrd/backgroundfile-42233.pdf>.

26 City of Toronto, *Toronto Pedestrian Charter*, 2002. <http://www.toronto.ca/transportation/walking/charter.htm>.

of communities in need by completing small-scale pedestrian projects within Priority and Tower Renewal neighbourhoods.²⁷

The Parks, Forestry and Recreation division of the City has also made progress in facilitating access and enhancements to shared green spaces. For example, the Community Gardens Program works in partnership with community groups to advance community gardens in city parks and other city-owned lands.²⁸ This model of community-led enhancements to green spaces provides opportunities for small-scale projects to be led by community members themselves with the City as a supportive partner.

Each of these examples sets out ways that the City is improving our built environment by enhancing access to physical recreation, improving active transportation options, and greening public spaces. There are two critical elements that contributed to the success of each example: starting with a clear and coherent plan, and providing genuine opportunities for communities to participate in the process. To replicate and expand these successes, it is therefore essential for strong connections and partnerships to exist between the City and communities. We set out how community animation is one increasingly common process to catalyze these relationships.

Community Leadership And The Built Environment

Many of the challenges that Toronto faces in improving its built environment require leadership at various levels of government. There are, however, many improvements that can occur within communities, if they have supports to take leadership roles.

Key to facilitating community leadership is identifying opportunities for dialogues and partnerships between decision makers and communities. There are a number of things that local authorities can do to create the right conditions for communities to lead built environment projects, including:

- Directly involving community leaders in strategic discussions about improvements to neighbourhoods;
- Reducing and moderating bureaucratic demands and supporting flexibility;
- Ensuring openness;
- Providing funds to meet community partners' practical needs;
- Multi-sectoral collaboration;
- Supporting training for community leaders; and
- Building opportunities for all partners to report back to communities.²⁹

To facilitate these kinds of partnerships, it is often useful to have dedicated staff that bridge the gaps between decision makers and communities – a role commonly referred to as community animation. Community animation is a process that supports community members to identify and make changes that are important at a local level. Animators are employed by agencies and work to support communities from the inception of an idea to its completion by acting as a catalyst, relationship-builder, supporter, and mentor. The animation role is unique because while animators are deeply involved, leadership of the project comes from the community itself; animators enable and support community to come together to solve shared problems and achieve shared goals.³⁰ Animators work with communities to determine what is important to them and include individuals and groups who are not already involved in green groups or community activities. Relationship building is a significant component of supporting community leaders. Not all communities have strong connections, so some projects require animators to bring together community members to identify common issues. In other settings, animators can connect

27 City of Toronto, *Toronto Walking Strategy*, 2009. <http://www.toronto.ca/transportation/walking/pdf/walking-strategy.pdf>.

28 City of Toronto, *Community Gardens – Implementation Process*. http://www.toronto.ca/parks/engagement/community-gardens/gardening_implementation.htm.

29 Derrick Purdue, Konica Razzaque, Robin Hambleton & Murray Steward with Chris Huxham & Siv Vangen, *Community Leadership in Area Regeneration*, The Policy Press and Joseph Roundtree Foundation, 2002, p. 48. <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/jr080-community-leadership-regeneration.pdf>.

30 Centre for Social Innovation, *Emergence: The Story of the Centre for Social Innovation*. http://s.socialinnovation.ca/files/Emergence_The_Story_of_the_Centre_for_Social_Innovation.pdf

existing community groups to resources such as financial support or advice about how a particular project may be successful. Animators can also act as brokers who help to negotiate solutions in cases where there are divergent views within communities or between communities and other partner organizations or institutions, like the City.

Toronto has a number of organizations that use animators to build community leadership. FoodShare Toronto's Community Food Animators focus on developing community kitchens, gardens, and Good Food Markets — small markets that sell high-quality, affordable fruits and vegetables — throughout the City of Toronto.³¹ Toronto Community Housing uses animators in partnership with community organizations and agencies to engage communities in revitalization projects, including the Lawrence Allen Revitalization Plan.³²

Livegreen Toronto — part of the Toronto Environment Office — currently operates an animation program that works with communities to create and enhance green initiatives. EcoSpark, an environmental education non-profit organization, facilitates the program on behalf of Livegreen Toronto. Livegreen's animators have worked with communities to plant gardens and trees in neighbourhoods, build rooftop gardens, improve active transportation options, and green apartments and condo buildings. As part of their work, the animators help communities to identify and launch initiatives, build skills in project management and community mobilizing, and coordinate workshops to connect communities with experts and suppliers. In 2010, the service resulted in 8600 volunteer hours, \$1 million of funding, and the initiation of 106 environmental projects.³³

An example of the Livegreen animators' work is an environmental and active transportation project in Scarborough. A community leader in Scarborough identified a potential bike trail that would link and extend existing trails, creating a 12km system to be used for day-to-day activities. This system would connect shops, schools, residential areas, and workplaces. Development of the bike trail is not only an environmental initiative, but it also promotes physical activity, provides community access to green space, and decreases congestion. The Community Animator for the region supported the community leader by assisting with the development of a project plan, establishing partnerships with key people and organizations, and developing a funding proposal. There is now support for the project from two Scarborough councillors, the Toronto Regional Conservation Authority, the Chinese Cultural Association, the Toronto District School Board, and the City of Toronto Cycling Infrastructure and Programs, and Transportation Services. If the current grant application is accepted the work plan for the trail includes workshops, tours, eco school partnerships and trail blaze installations along the length of the trail.

The Livegreen community animation project was originally intended to run for five years, but this was scaled back to four years in the lead-up to the 2012 municipal budget and the project's funding for its final year was cut by 50 percent, leading to a scaled-down program. Funding for Livegreen's animators will cease in at the end of 2012.

Supporting Community Leaders To Improve Toronto's Built Environment

There are numerous initiatives underway in Toronto to improve our built environment, and many are successful because of the work of community leaders. A key element of supporting community leaders is to ensure that there are skilled staff that can facilitate partnerships and dialogues. Animators are a valuable tool to catalyze these

31 Food Share, *Toronto's Community Food Animators*. <http://www.foodshare.net/toronto-community-food-animators>

32 Toronto Community Housing Corporation, *Local Heroes in Lawrence Heights*, 2011. http://www.torontohousing.ca/news/20110617/local_heroes_lawrence_heights.

33 Livegreen Toronto, *Live Green Toronto's Community Animators*. http://www.toronto.ca/livegreen/greenneighbourhood_animators.htm.

initiatives, and there are examples of a range of organizations in Toronto that have successfully used animators to achieve shared goals.

The 2013 budget provides an opportunity for Council to reaffirm its support for models of developing community leadership and to provide opportunities for communities across Toronto to make health-enhancing improvements to their built environments.

Because this model is based on developing strong relationships with communities and other organizations and institutions, stability is essential. Communities must be confident that their collective efforts will continue to be supported. Council can create stability by including a long-term built environment community leadership development program in the 2013-14 budget.

Experience with the Livegreen Toronto program has demonstrated that a relatively small number of animators can support community leaders to catalyze significant changes across the City. At its peak, Livegreen had nine animators and an annual budget of \$735,000. This allowed for one full-time animator in each of the city's four regions and four specialist animators who worked in diversity, capacity building, volunteer recruitment, and schools in addition to working part-time in a region.

Recommendations

In its 2013-14 budget, the City of Toronto should:

1. Establish a new built environment community leadership development program; and
2. Ensure stable funding of at least \$735,000 per annum to allow to program to employ nine animators, including a mix of regional and specialist animators, to coordinate the community leadership development program.

In a city as diverse as Toronto, specialist animators can play an important role in working with community leaders to facilitate improvements in the built environment that reflect the needs of our population. Additionally, the significant variability in built environments in a city as geographically large as Toronto mean that some communities would benefit from more specialized animation. Therefore, once the community leadership development program is established, the City of Toronto should:

3. Consider providing funding that would allow the built environment community leadership development program to employ additional specialist animators to work with communities and populations with unique needs, such as immigrant-receiving communities and neighbourhoods that lack access to green spaces.

The built environment has significant impacts on our health and the health of Toronto's communities. Ensuring equitable access to physical activity, active transportation, and green spaces can have positive health impacts for communities across the city, and there are already many examples of improvements to our built environment. Fostering community leadership is one critical tool in enabling communities to identify and lead projects in their own neighbourhoods that improve the built environment and residents' health. Having dedicated staff to support community leadership has proved to be successful in Toronto, and Council should ensure that this model is supported in the long term.