

# Research UPDATE

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## Summary

This article highlights research in Edmonton, Alberta that used key stakeholder perspectives to examine factors that promote or prevent the development of neighbourhoods in urban areas where walking, being active, and buying healthy, affordable food are easy.

## Key Terms

**Food security** is the degree of access that people have to healthy and affordable food, within their community or neighbourhood. A food secure neighbourhood has consistently good access to healthy and affordable food over time.

**Street connectivity** refers to how well streets, parks and paths are interconnected within a community, to facilitate active forms of transportation, such as walking and cycling.

**Healthy neighbourhoods** generally refer to those where most residents have easy and equal access or opportunity to walk and be physically active, and to buying healthy, affordable food.

### Alberta Centre for Active Living

11759 Groat Road  
Edmonton, AB T5M 3K6  
Phone: 780-427-6949  
Alberta toll-free: 1-800-661-4551  
active.living@ualberta.ca  
www.centre4activeliving.ca  
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## Community Leaders' Perspectives on Building Healthier Neighbourhoods in Urban Settings

**Marianne I. Clark, MA, Doctoral Student, Sedentary Living Lab; Tanya R. Berry, PhD, Assistant Professor; John C. Spence, PhD, Associate Professor and Director Sedentary Living Lab: Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta, Canada**

### Background

Recently, the link between the built environment, food security and physical inactivity has captured the public's attention (Martin & Ferris, 2007; Saelens, Sallis, & Frank, 2003). Research shows that people who live in neighbourhoods with good street connectivity and housing density do more walking and cycling and have lower rates of obesity than people who live in residential-only neighbourhoods (Saelens et al., 2003; Spence, Cutumisu, Edwards, & Evans, 2008).



As a result, the general public, city leaders and urban planners are paying closer attention to how our communities are designed. The purpose of this study was to find out what influences the planning decisions made by key stakeholders in Edmonton, a city with a population over one million. We wanted to find out what might promote or prevent the development of neighbourhoods where walking, being active, and buying healthy, affordable food are easy.

### Interviewees and Questions

Seventeen stakeholders were interviewed for the study.

- Nine were employees of the municipal and public health sector, e.g., those that work in transportation, planning, and community initiatives.
- Three were city councillors.
- Five were from the private sector, e.g., land developers.

Participants were asked to explain how they think the built environment might influence health behaviours (physical activity and diet) at a neighbourhood level. They were also asked what role they think their organization plays in the creation of food secure and walkable neighbourhoods.

### Municipal and public health sector employees

This group supported the development of neighbourhoods with more housing density, street connectivity and better access to healthy and affordable food. Yet, participants also said it is important to balance a vision for an efficient, attractive city with the demands of the general public and the realities of the marketplace.

As one municipal official said, "We continue to envision or dream about a type of neighbourhood...that seems to be very much at odds with the marketplace...our visions of walkable, sustainable neighbourhoods just don't [meet] the bottom line."

## Community Leaders' Perspectives on Building Healthier Neighbourhoods... (Continued from front)

Barriers to the development of healthy neighbourhoods included lack of financial resources, poor public and stakeholder awareness, and existing social norms. For example, density is one of the features of walkable neighbourhoods. But data from this study show a public opposition to more density. One participant put it this way, *"Not everyone is in support of density, immediately people think of slums and run-down buildings..."*

More discussion between the private and public sectors was put forward as one possible solution.

### City councillors

City councillors also liked the idea of these neighbourhoods but reminded us that economics and car reliance are big barriers. One councillor asked: *"Who is it that pays, or should pay, and for what? Generally speaking ... everything has a cost ... who's going to pay the costs, is it going to be general tax dollars, is it going to be private, is it going to be users?"*

City councillors also said that because car culture is so socially acceptable in Alberta, people willingly buy housing in areas where they have drive to and from work, school, shopping, and recreation. Therefore, people don't often make lifestyle choices such as walking or biking to work, or taking public transportation.

One councillor explained, *"People are generally car-dependent, so [suburban] neighbourhoods are going to continue to be built."*

However, this group did notice shifting consumer demands and increased transit use, with one councillor commenting, *"Our ridership last year was the highest it's ever been."*

This group also suggested that more education for children and youth about these issues and better use of local agriculture (e.g., more public farmer's markets) may be helpful steps to take.

### Private sector


Participants in the private sector said they noticed recent "media buzz around health and environmental issues" which made the link between where people live and health behaviours such as physical activity "important considerations" in their own work. However, many did not believe that creating walkable environments would result in more people walking. Many put the responsibility to be active upon the individual.

Car culture and car reliance was identified again as a social barrier to change. Yet there was a shared belief that, *"...the public has a responsibility to manage their expectations"* when it comes to public demand for bigger roads and lower housing costs.

On the positive side, private sector representatives identified increasing public awareness of community design and well-being as being an important facilitator that would make their work easier.

## Summary

All groups cited economic constraints and identified existing social norms, attitudes, and behaviours as barriers to the development of healthier built environments.

However, all groups also identified current or potential facilitators, such as growing public awareness and increasing collaboration between the public and private sectors, providing a note of optimism. 

## About the Authors

**Marianne Clark** is a doctoral student in the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation at the University of Alberta. Her research interests include psycho-social determinants of physical activity and the fitness practices and experiences of girls and women.

Dr. **Tanya Berry** is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation at the University of Alberta, a research associate at the Alberta Centre for Active Living and an Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research (AHFMR) Population Health Investigator. Her research interests include physical activity messaging, and the relationship between the built environment and obesity.

Dr. **John Spence** is an associate professor in the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation and an adjunct associate professor in the Centre for Health Promotion Studies at the University of Alberta. His research focus includes behavioural medicine, research methods, benefits and determinants of physical activity, physical inactivity and obesity, and ecological models.

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