



WellSpring

Sharing physical activity knowledge

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Repurposing our streets for physical activity:

The Open Streets Model

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Introduction

Imagine yourself in the middle of the main street in your community. You might be walking, or riding a bike, or pushing a stroller. But don't freak out! The streets are full of people instead of vehicles. You hear laughter and music instead of horns and motors. And for a rare moment, your city streets are a paved park or an outdoor gym where the community has come together to explore their city in a fun and active way.

Open Streets are free recreation programs that temporarily close streets to vehicles and opens them to people to participate in physical activity. People of all ages and abilities are invited into the streets to walk, bike and play typically for a few hours on a weekend. In addition to an open roadway, Open Streets programs have activity hubs along the route planned with different physical activities and health promotion programming.

Surveys from Open Streets programs around the world demonstrate that they work to get people moving.¹ Participation provides the majority of adults with the recommended number of minutes of physical activity for the day. For some individuals, a day at Open Streets can provide the recommended minutes of physical activity for one week. Participant surveys also highlight that, if not for Open Streets, many participants would be engaged in sedentary behavior. Open Streets programs provide a new and exciting opportunity for people to be physically active while also providing a platform for physical activity groups and service providers to introduce themselves to a new audience.

From Bogota, Colombia to Thunder Bay, Ontario

The Open Streets movement was born in Bogota, Colombia in the 1970's with a program called "Ciclovía". Today, the Ciclovía route is over 100 kilometres long. Ciclovía takes place every Sunday and holiday in Bogota with one million people participating every single Sunday.

Cover photo:
Open Streets in
Guadalajara, Mexico

S U M M A R Y

From Bogota, Columbia, to Thunder Bay, Ontario, Open Streets provide communities with the opportunity to be active on the streets. Open Streets are free recreation programs that temporarily close the streets to traffic and open them to people to walk, bike, and just be physically active. People can engage with their local community and businesses, as well as learn more about community amenities and programs.

Key recommendations and strategies are provided with links to various examples and toolkits to support the development of an Open Streets program.



Open Streets in Bogota, Colombia

Inspired by Bogota, cities across North America and the world are hosting Open Streets programs including Canadian cities such as Thunder Bay, Ontario. In 2014, EcoSuperior Environmental Programs, a non-profit group in Thunder Bay, hosted the first "Open Streets Thunder Bay". More than 2000 people participated in Open Streets Thunder Bay by walking, cycling, skateboarding or roller skiing, and trying yoga, cross-fit, tai chi, bike polo and other fun physical activities along the 5 km route. Since 2014, Open Streets Thunder Bay has taken place three times.



Open Streets in Thunder Bay, Ontario

Thinking Differently about Getting Around your City

In addition to encouraging people to be physically active during program hours, Open Streets have the ability to encourage residents to think differently about how they travel in their communities and the role that streets have in encouraging people to be physically active.

Open Streets allow participants the opportunity to use active modes of transportation on city streets. This opportunity has the ability to change perceptions of the distance, time and effort it takes to travel to different neighbourhood destinations using active modes.

Open Streets are also an excellent opportunity to educate participants about different active transportation infrastructure including protected bike lanes and a variety of pavement treatments. These educational opportunities are often organized by active transportation advocacy groups to help make the case for increased investment in active transportation infrastructure.



Ciclovía takes place in Bogota with one million people participating every single Sunday.

Key Steps to Develop your Open Streets Program²:

- 1) Build a strong team
- 2) Pitch your idea & build support for your Open Streets concept
- 3) Plan your route
- 4) Design activity hubs of complementary programming
- 5) Funding
- 6) Gain approval from necessary stakeholders
- 7) Logistics
- 8) Marketing
- 9) Volunteers
- 10) Evaluation

At many Open Streets programs, public transit providers engage participants in educational programs about transit routes, schedules and fares in attempt to encourage greater uptake in this mode of transportation. Most commonly, participants get to practice mounting bicycles on the front of buses which can be a scary activity on a regular day. In Los Angeles County, the regional transportation provider, METRO, found that transit ridership increased on Open Streets dates.³ Because of the increased ridership, METRO has run a granting program to fund Open Streets programs in Los Angeles County since 2014 to encourage more people to try public transit and active modes of transportation.



Bicycles and bus at Open Streets

Open Streets are Different than Other Street Festivals

Open Streets programs are different than other street closure festivals for a number of reasons.

First, Open Streets should be long enough to encourage movement and a flow of people throughout the route — this requires space (8 80 Cities would recommend 5 km of streets). For that reason, streets do not look crowded nor are people forced to walk shoulder-to-shoulder. They can move at a pace that increases their heart rate if they choose to.

Secondly, streets are not full of booths selling arts, crafts, food and drinks. Purchases happen at brick-and-mortar businesses along the route at Open Streets. By doing this, existing businesses can reap the benefits of the captive audience participating. In fact, businesses have seen increased revenue during Open Streets when they open their doors and engage participants.³

Third, because of their length, Open Streets routes are not entirely closed to traffic. Although the streets that are open to pedestrian traffic do not allow vehicle traffic for the duration of the program, major streets that cross the route are “soft-closed”. Soft-closed intersections are major signalized intersections along the route that allow vehicle traffic to cross the route. These intersections provide relief to drivers and mitigate potential traffic congestion that could occur when large portions of streets are closed to traffic.



Temporary protected bike lane

Engaging local government in planning is a key strategy to develop a cost-sharing model among local governments, non-profit organizations, and corporate sponsorships or donations.

In doing so, resources may be provided in-kind or fees waived for barricades and road closure signs, policing, and cost of transit detours, to list a few.²

Getting Started

The most critical component to planning an Open Streets program is selecting the best route. An Open Streets route should be iconic — the main streets of our communities — where people already visit and enjoy. An iconic street is not a highway, parkway or trail. The intention behind selecting an iconic route is to encourage people to visit these destinations outside of the Open Streets hours using active modes of transportation.

Participation in an Open Streets program directly correlates with people's proximity to the Open Streets route. People come to Open Streets when they are within a 15-minute proximity of the route — a 15-minute walk, bike, transit trip or drive. For example, 65.2% of surveyed participants at Open Streets Thunder Bay 2014 lived within the two postal codes of the 5 km Open Streets route — meaning they were within a short walk or bike ride from the route. Be sure to connect your route with high density neighbourhoods of varying socio-economic demographics. These connections will help increase participation and facilitate community connections.

Conclusion

Open Streets are one of the most effective and affordable large-scale health promotion programs a community can undertake. To assist communities of all shapes and sizes in moving forward with developing Open Streets programs, 8 80 Cities recently built the first comprehensive Open Streets toolkit on an open-source website. The toolkit includes information on how to plan a route, how to engage community partners and volunteers, how to create and use marketing tools, and more. The website also includes a number of other resources, such as fact sheets and videos, to help communicate the benefits of Open Streets with various stakeholders.

References

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A well-planned route ensures easier participation, route activation, and ultimately future growth of your program.

Key points to consider include²:

The Spine: *Identify your city's most iconic streets*

Connect to Existing Features: *Identify and connect local attractions such as libraries, museums, recreation spaces.*

Neighbourhood Connections: *Be sure to connect your route with high density neighbourhoods of varying socio-economic demographics.*