



Windsor, ON

Photo: IBI Group



Regina, SK

Photo: Daniel Paquet



Victoria, BC

Photo: IBI Group

Primer on Active Transportation: Making it Work in Canadian Communities

The recent rise of urban liveability, health and climate change as key public issues in Canada has led to an unprecedented level of interest in active transportation among municipal, territorial, provincial and federal governments. Active transportation refers to any form of human-powered transportation, such as walking, cycling, wheeling, in-line skating, skateboarding, ice skating or canoeing/rowing. In the context of urban transportation planning, the term is often used to refer to cycling and walking only.

In recent years, many communities have made great strides in terms of enabling, supporting and promoting active transportation.

Active transportation today

Overall Canadian trends in active transportation are difficult to identify, given that there is no nation-wide monitoring of walking and cycling use, cyclist and pedestrian safety, or spending on active transportation facilities and services. Nevertheless, an examination of diverse data sources reveals that walking and cycling activity appears to be growing slowly, and highlights considerable diversity among metropolitan areas. Nationally, the 2006 Census found that 6.4% of employed adults walked to work (a decrease from 2001), while 1.3% cycled (an increase from 2001). Rates of walking to school appear to be holding steady, while cycling to school has been in long-term decline.

Government activity in support of active transportation, meanwhile, has been accelerating. Many communities are diligently expanding their on-road and off-road cycling networks, and bike sharing programs have either been planned or launched in several cities. Special events

to encourage and celebrate cycling are spreading rapidly, and bicycle skills training programs are being established or expanded.

Canadian stakeholders have identified a number of challenges that impede progress toward their objectives for greater active transportation activity, safety and enjoyment. Several of the most important barriers are highlighted in the following points:

- **Funding.** Despite stakeholders' successes in finding creative ways to fund active transportation projects, underinvestment appears to be endemic and active transportation budgets are often nominal.
- **Data.** Most municipalities lack basic information on active transportation users, trip purposes, route choices and personal motivators. This leads to difficulty in measuring outcomes and justifying future projects.
- **Built form.** Major challenges include dispersed land use patterns in suburban areas, competition among different road users for constrained road rights-of-way in more urban communities, and road networks that optimize traffic flow while providing little support for walking and cycling.
- **Cycling culture.** While a lack of cycling culture is an issue in some places, in others the influence of more extreme advocates for cycling may discourage participation by more average citizens.
- **Individual perceptions of cycling.** Preconceived notions about cycling's difficulty, comfort and safety can discourage non-cyclists from trying it.
- **Winter weather.** Snow both discourages individuals from walking and cycling, and presents operational challenges to those charged with maintaining sidewalks, bike lanes and pathways.
- **Geography.** Many communities have windy areas, steep hills to climb and descend, and rivers or escarpments that lengthen trips from point to point.
- **Other institutional issues.** Leading and supporting change within governments is not easy. New policies and objectives require consensus, and new partnerships must be forged. Conventional practices and standards need to be updated, and staff training takes time and energy. Overlapping jurisdictions necessitate coordination and resolution, and complex processes for project approval and funding must be navigated.

Based on experiences across Canada, the following principles have been identified to guide practitioners and their communities in responding to these diverse challenges.



Hamilton, ON

Photo: IBI Group



Montreal, QC

Photo: IBI Group



Toronto, ON

Photo: IBI Group

Principle 1 – Leadership

Proactive change requires leadership, and successful active transportation programs are true to this rule. Effective leadership can come from within government (e.g. municipal staff members, elected officials) and outside it (e.g. local advocates, business executives). Finding champions can be a challenge, but highlighting the benefits of active transportation for issues as diverse as the environment, health and tourism can help attract them. Building media and public support for active transportation, and providing active support to the champions that emerge, can help ensure that leadership exists when needed.

Selected strategies:

- Use “hot button” issues such as child safety or neighbourhood economic development to provide a platform for champions
- Create opportunities for elected officials to provide support consistent with their policy positions and political objectives
- Build a robust leadership base to minimize risks from election cycles and shifting short-term priorities
- Use the process of active transportation plan development to catalyze political support
- Leverage senior government commitment to validate tough local decisions
- Nurture independent community groups as partners in active transportation programs

Principle 2 – Partnerships

Active transportation issues require a multi-disciplinary approach, and working effectively across departments and jurisdictions can accelerate progress. Key partners include transit agencies, health services, other levels of government, accessibility stakeholders, schools and community groups.

Selected strategies:

- Create interdepartmental working committees to coordinate the efficient use of active transportation resources
- Work with health agencies to support research and promotional initiatives
- Work with schools to improve independent mobility for children
- Leverage accessibility requirements to improve facilities for all pedestrians



The success of Victoria’s Bike to Work Week has led to significant partnerships with the media, and the resulting coverage has attracted corporate sponsors. Organizers have been careful to keep the agendas of collaborators from entering the agenda of the event, which has meant that City staff are able to participate and has helped to encourage diverse partnerships, in particular, with the business community.

Photo: John Luton

- Work with transit agencies to improve access for pedestrians and cyclists
- “De-politicize” active transportation messages to attract partners and encourage broad participation in community events
- Expand public involvement and extend the reach of government by engaging and supporting non-governmental organizations

Principle 3 – Public involvement

Successful public involvement can benefit from non-traditional approaches that involve multiple stakeholders in a focused dialogue. Neighbourhood-based consultations can generate more involvement than community-wide processes because individual concerns are more relevant, and solutions are easier to envisage. Pedestrian issues, in particular, tend to be more successfully addressed at a very local level and in smaller communities.

Selected strategies:

- Use a neighbourhood-based approach to consultation
- Clearly introduce new concepts to the public
- Keep discussions balanced and well informed by engaging groups and individuals with diverse interests
- Create citizen advisory committees to provide input and guidance
- Use web-based communications to build and maintain community engagement
- Use creative events, such as promoting Jane’s Walk, walkabouts, bike to work week, or social media, for wider and more diverse participation

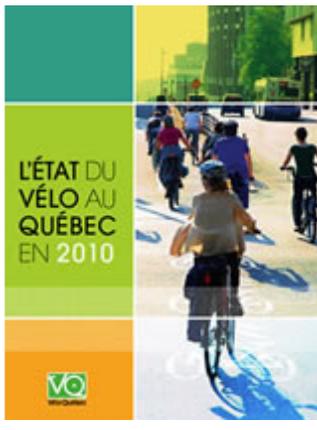
Principle 4 – Financial and human resources

Many communities have overcome limitations on their financial and staffing resources. To make the most of available funds, they have relied on strong partnerships and creative approaches to shared budgeting that reflect the diverse community benefits of active transportation. Several provinces have significant, dedicated funding programs for active transportation, and particularly in Quebec the involvement of the province appears to be a major factor in enabling bikeway construction. Improved access to transit is a common theme of provincial cost-sharing programs.



Active transportation public consultation conducted in an important Cape Breton local meeting point - the Mayflower Mall.

Photo: IBI Group



MTQ's recurring "State of Bicycling in Québec" survey appears to be the most significant data collection effort cited.

Photo: Vélo Québec



Installing a permanent cyclist counting station in Montreal, QC

Photo: Vélo Québec

Selected strategies:

- Adopt guidelines for walking and cycling budgets as a proportion of overall transportation spending
- Complement active transportation budgets by funding active transportation elements of major works projects within the larger budget envelope
- Access transit funding from senior levels of government to improve transit system access by active modes
- Use multi-agency consensus to leverage funding from senior levels of government
- Seek funding from public insurers, health agencies, transit systems and other possible partners

Principle 5 – Knowledge and skills

Particularly in the formative stages of an active transportation program, it is important to build the knowledge and skills of responsible staff members as well as other partners and stakeholders. Data collection programs and pilot projects are also critical to building a local knowledge base and improving improve practices over time.

Selected strategies:

- Ongoing training for staff across departments including planning, engineering and operations
- Specify data collection as an integral element of projects, for example by building permanent bicycle counting stations into new bikeways
- Improve conventional data collection programs such as traffic counts by including active modes as a matter of course

Principle 6 – Policy and planning

It is critical to recognize and support active transportation in community plans and policies at all levels, from growth management strategies to road design standards. Land use decisions have long-term implications for the potential to walk and cycle, and for the quality of walking and cycling trips.

Selected strategies:

- Develop a clear and feasible implementation strategy

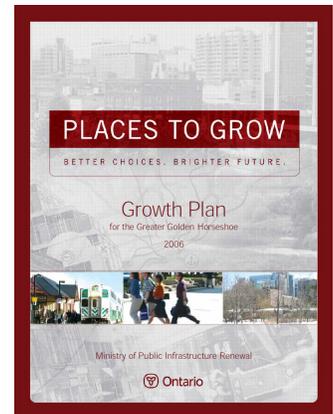
- Balance the benefits of individual walking and cycling plans with the value of integrating them into a multimodal active transportation strategy
- Highlight existing policies where they offer valuable support
- Set targets for active transportation use at a local or neighbourhood scale, rather than for an entire community, to guide action and enable evaluation
- Improve development approval processes to guarantee that walking and cycling needs are met

Principle 7 – Travel facilities

The provision of safe, comfortable and convenient facilities for walking and cycling is fundamental to any successful active transportation program. Facility priorities can be identified through preparation of a network master plan, and methodically implemented through design, construction, operation and maintenance processes. It is also important to keep watch for unexpected opportunities to implement facilities at little cost or difficulty, even though they may not be current priorities. Several communities have accelerated their shift to a civic culture that is more supportive of active transportation by implementing “signature” or “backbone” facilities that offer practical benefits as well symbolic importance for the public and elected officials; frequently, these facilities allow pedestrians and cyclists to traverse physical barriers such as rivers or freeways. An openness to innovation and best practices from elsewhere can help overcome the limitations of existing design standards and conventions.

Selected strategies:

- Mandate the inclusion of active transportation facilities in new developments
- “Follow the pavers” to implement active transportation facilities as part of other scheduled road construction projects
- Use visible, symbolic projects to help change civic culture
- Increase opportunities for pedestrians and cyclists to cross arterial streets
- Create space by removing or narrowing motorized vehicle lanes
- Prioritize snow removal in key active transportation corridors



Respondents cited several examples of key “backbone” facilities, such as Vancouver’s bicycle boulevard network.

Photo: Vélo Québec



Ottawa’s Corktown bridge, for pedestrians and cyclists to cross the Rideau Canal, not only serves a substantial demand, but helped establish the legitimacy of several similar projects.

Photo: IBI Group



Respondents noted a growing population that thinks walking and cycling for transportation are becoming trendy, fashionable and “green”. This was underscored in Montreal, where BIXI and Vélo Québec’s Féria du vélo (bike fest) are successfully marketing cycling with images of a more utilitarian user, as opposed to the image of either the spandex-wearing athlete or the counter-culture bike courier that many Canadians still envision.

Photo: Jocelyn Michel, Bixi Montreal

Principle 8 – Road safety

A variety of practices and programs can improve safety for pedestrians and cyclists. Improved facilities such as sidewalks and bicycle lanes are key, while road safety audits or working groups with strong community and stakeholder representation can also effectively identify and remedy specific problem locations. Education and enforcement, including CAN-BIKE cycling skills training and helmet promotion, are also important.

Selected strategies:

- Involve community advisory groups in safety programs
- Improve data collection on walking and cycling safety
- Consider perceived safety risks and their impacts on willingness to use active modes

Principle 9 – Crime and personal security

Overcoming real and perceived concerns about personal security and bicycle theft requires both understanding and action.

Selected strategies:

- Apply the principles of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) to the creation of spaces for active transportation
- Involve police services and encourage their adoption of bicycle-based patrols and anti-theft programs

Principle 10 – Affecting a culture: attitudes and perceptions

While lingering social biases and misconceptions regarding active transportation persist, in many communities the profile of walking and cycling issues is growing and levels of public support are rising to unprecedented levels. The keys to sparking this kind of cultural shift remain mysterious, but communities are able to foster and accelerate it through signature projects like bikeshare programs, special events and new, high-profile facilities. Increasingly, the potential of social media tools to engage key audiences and influence personal attitudes and opinions is also being demonstrated.

Selected strategies:

- Reframing walking and cycling as popular activities for everyone, not just for enthusiasts

- Complement supply-side steps with information, promotion and education
- Conduct fun and diverse events, such as walkabouts, bike to work week, or social media, that encourage widespread participation and invite people to try active modes for new trip purposes or destinations

Principle 11 – Outreach to encourage active choices

Governments and their partners can work directly with employers, schools, community groups and households to broaden the impact of active transportation initiatives. Individualized marketing approaches that help interested individuals overcome barriers to walking or cycling have been shown to have a real impact in several Canadian communities. Special events and campaigns that ask individuals to register or make pledges to mark their participation can also be effective. Programs delivered at schools and workplaces allow customized strategies to reach audiences that are well defined and accessible.

Selected strategies:

- Test the potential of individualized marketing programs
- Conduct special events that involve a challenge or membership component
- Lead or support school-based initiatives such as school travel planning or Active and Safe Routes to School, as well as workplace-based events or campaigns



Walking-only events cited tended to be smaller scale with the one notable exception being Jane’s Walk. The two-day event comprises themed neighbourhood walking tours and, by 2011, had spread to 40 Canadian municipalities (44 cities outside Canada).

Photo: Flickr account ‘Valerie27’



Community-based social marketing approaches have been among the more successful initiatives in encouraging individuals to choose active transportation, such as TransLink’s TravelSmart program in Metro Vancouver. Pilot projects measured an average 8% increase in walking and cycling by residents of urban and suburban neighbourhoods.

More information

The information in this primer has been extracted from the Transportation Association of Canada publication *Active Transportation - Making It Work in Canadian Communities (2010)*, which is available for purchase in TAC's online bookstore. That resource offers a distillation of the lessons learned by Canadian communities and practitioners from their experiences with active transportation, as gathered through surveys, interviews and focus group discussions. It assists Canadian local, regional, provincial and federal governments in understanding critical factors for successful implementation of active transportation strategies.

Disclaimer

Every effort has been made to ensure that all information in this primer is accurate and up-to-date. The Transportation Association of Canada assumes no responsibility for errors or omissions. The primer does not reflect a technical or policy position of TAC.

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