

Active City Report

HEALTHY INFRASTRUCTURE

By Leah Wong

The city should be better utilizing its built environment to promote active living. This means creating mixed-use developments and updating active transportation infrastructure says a new report from a trio of city departments.

The report, *Active City: Designing for Health*, from medical officer of health Dr. **David McKeown**, chief planner **Jennifer Keesmaat** and transportation services general manager **Stephen Buckley** discusses the role the built environment plays in promoting health. It outlines how the built environment can make it easy or difficult to lead an active lifestyle and what should be done to reduce barriers to active living.

“The built environment, as you know from previous work we’ve done, makes a big difference in how healthy we are,” said McKeown. The report focusses primarily on how the built form affects how active the population is, as well as how form affects public safety and air quality, which McKeown said are all part of chronic disease prevention.

After being presented to the **Board of Health**, two recommendations were adopted. The board directed that the report authors collaborate to host an Active City Forum, and second, the authors support city manager **Joe Pennachetti** in ensuring the Open Streets Toronto initiative is launched this summer.

Ward 27 Toronto Centre-Rosedale councillor **Kristyn Wong-Tam** put forward the second recommendations. She thinks the Open Street event will further promote the ideas about active health that are outlined in the report.

McKeown said the 10 principles outlined in the report should inform the city’s protocols, plans and legislation. This is evident, he said, based on the fact that the three authors’ departments came to a consensus about these principles.

The report is consistent with the official plan said Keesmaat. Presently, City Planning is reviewing the transportation policy in the plan and will submit draft policies to the Planning and Growth Committee in June. Keesmaat said that the city has an opportunity to use the official plan to “move forward consistently based on a shared vision.”

The fundamental message in the report is the first principle, said McKeown. It states that “an Active City shapes the built environment to promote opportunities for active living.” McKeown also said the report has an equity lens as not all neighborhoods are equally suited to promote physical activity. Neighbourhoods in the city centre are

more activity-friendly, while the suburbs are less so. This is related to the need for a car outside of the core, lower densities and the lack of proximity to amenities.

“There are very different urban forms in different parts of the city,” said Keesmaat. “It’s a challenge to build a culture that accepts active transportation as legitimate.”

Toronto is moving toward this. An April 2012 Toronto Public Health report found that more than half of Torontonians would prefer to travel on foot, or by bike or public transit. A number of factors predict how prevalent active transportation is. These include how safe people feel cycling or walking, the distance they have to travel, and what the network is like to get there.

McKeown said that it is important that transportation is at the forefront of the election debate both at the municipal and provincial levels. Transit is an important part of the conversation as it is used by cyclists and pedestrians to get them from places that are too far to walk or bike. McKeown said people that take transit instead of driving are generally more physically active.

Another way the city could add legitimacy to active transportation is through policy. Keesmaat said City Planning is looking at adding transit network and complete streets frameworks into the official plan, and will publish a report about recommendations related to the design of mobility hubs in June.

The design for Eglinton Connects, which Keesmaat said is a really good example of best practices, came out of a big discussion on whether or not cycling infrastructure should be included. She said if there was policy in the official plan about cycling infrastructure, then there would be a new starting point for planning.

“It doesn’t just make it stronger, it makes it a requirement,” she said.

Having this type of policy in the official plan, would make it so that council would have to follow the policy or go through the process of amending the official plan. Keesmaat says the official plan is an important tool that can embed a larger vision, creating the ability to move forward consistently based on a shared vision.

On top of proposing policies that would keep the official plan in line with this report, McKeown also said the authors’ hope that the report will influence external partners including architects and developers. The aim for the next Active Transportation Summit is to target these types of stakeholders to encourage development that promotes healthier lifestyles. [nru](#)