

Steps to Stride: Creating Action at the Grass Roots Level

Author: Heather Keam, Haldimand-Norfolk Health Unit

Support Authors: Central West Coordinating Committee

Heather Keam, 12 Gilbertson Dr, Simcoe ON Canada,

heather.keam@hnhu.org

This paper provides an overview of the walkable communities' model walkON and its development. From this paper, it is hoped that the reader will gain a clear understanding of how walkON evolved, what worked, what did not, and what actions will contribute to its continued success and sustainability in the future.

Biography

Heather Keam has 7 years experience in Public Health. After graduating from Brock University, she travelled to Australia and attended the University of Canberra. Heather is one of the founding members of the walkON partnership and has presented at the International Walk 21 conference in Toronto and a poster presentation at Walk 21 in New York City.

Steps to Stride: Creating Action at the Grass Roots

Level

Author: Heather Keam, Haldimand-Norfolk Health Unit
Supporting Authors: Central West Coordinating Committee

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

walkON is a model that is committed to engaging the community in the creation of environments that support walking. walkON envisions an Ontario where walkable communities are the social norm. From spring 2005 to December 2007 the Central West partnership developed the overall conceptual plan for the model and devised a number of resource supports. To establish a strong foundation for the model the group commissioned a review of literature in the spring of 2005 and undertook a needs assessment in 4 of the 6 communities. Building on these initial foundations walkON developed a(n):

- Multi-site Partnership Structure to provide resources to the local level and be flexible enough to meet local needs;
- Look and identity to use on all walkON materials in an effort to avoid the issue of ownership;
- Information Session presentation to raise awareness of the issue of the built environment and walkON;
- Workshop to bring together local community members, elected officials and community organizations and support community action planning at a local level;
- Walkability Toolkit to encourage and support local citizens to form groups to work on walkability issues;
- Walkability Checklist to encourage and support individuals in assessing the walkability of their neighbourhood.
- Newsletter to communicate local activities and provide local updates to partners
- Website to provide information about walkON and walkability to professionals and the community at large

The group also continued to review the literature and continued to identify needs within their local community. Throughout the development of the program, the partnership continued to refine its overall structure. At the heart of **walkON** was the **Coordinating Committee**, comprised of Health Health Coordinators from each Central West Region. The Coordinating Committee was supported by a dynamic interdisciplinary **Advisory Board** of politicians, planners, public works, community services, transportation experts and community members. The Board provided technical expertise, input and guidance around different aspects of the resources offered by **walkON**. The Coordinating Committee also worked with a diverse **Partnership Group** of regional/provincial groups who share the same passion and commitment to walkable communities. Finally, citizen's groups were formed at the local level in some communities to implement activities that foster the development of walkable communities.

walkON embraces environmental supports and policy for physical activity. Early during planning stages, the Coordinating Committee members recognized that the built environment was a major barrier to physical activity. They did not know what the barriers were for implementing a walkable community. To address this gap in knowledge, the Coordinating Committee undertook a needs assessment. The results from the initial needs assessment indicated that the awareness and attitudes of the community at large ultimately influenced planners and elected officials. Therefore, walkON initially focused on developing materials targeted to the community at large that could be adapted and used at the local level. The Information Sessions, the Workshops, the Walkability Checklist and the Toolkit aimed to engage interested and motivated individuals to participate in the creation of walkable communities. In addition, the coordinating Committee began working on the community education campaign that was intended to build support for public policy related to health and the built environment. Since there was little understanding of public knowledge, awareness and attitudes towards walkable communities, the Coordinating Committee members needed to collect this information before they could properly tailor messages about walkable communities to the public. They collected baseline information to assess the public's knowledge and support for walkable communities. Over time, and funding permitting, they plan to monitor this data to determine if there are changes in attitudes and perceptions.

In 2008 walkON used the data collected to determine appropriate messages for a community education campaign that addresses the impacts of the built environment on health. This community education campaign was called *iCANwalk*.

The walkON Coordinating Committee quickly recognized that the walkON model would benefit other communities in Ontario and began to seek partnerships to start an expansion of walkON. Green Communities Canada adopted the walkON model in early 2009, and the remainder of 2009 and 2010 was spent supporting this transition, as well as continuing with local implementation.

Walkable communities encourage citizens to use cars less and choose walking more often in the environment in which they live and work on a daily basis. When schools and work places, stores, parks, and restaurants are within comfortable walking distances, such as in well designed, compact communities, the need to drive can be significantly reduced. Planning features that promote walking include:

- *Connectivity* – sidewalks, trails, pathways are used to connect one area to another in a neighborhood
- *Density* – the amount of activity found in an area
- *Access to amenities* – conveniences, common places and services, such as stores, schools, parks, and libraries are within short distances
- *Aesthetics* – lighting, landscaping, variety building types and amenities such benches, shade trees, and shelter
- *Safety* along walkway routes – separation from the road, traffic calming features, clear and functional sidewalks, adequate lighting, crossing signals and legible street signs

Potential Audience

walkON has the potential to support other towns, cities, communities/neighbourhoods, or suburban areas across Ontario and beyond in their efforts to promote and encourage walkable communities. The model also has the potential to target residential housing developers and retail business owners in the future. walkON is currently being carried out in the Central West Region of Ontario Canada.

Program Limitations

walkON was successful at getting input and multi-sectoral involvement from municipal staff, councilors, other stakeholder groups, and residents. However, among residents many of those that attended the information sessions were people who were already somewhat informed or the “converted”. The challenge is to find ways to attract individuals who may not have thought about the connection between neighborhood walkability, the number of car trips taken to access amenities, and health outcomes to attend information sessions.

PROGRAM FOUNDATIONS

THEORETICAL/CONCEPTUAL BASE

WalkON is grounded in three theories/approaches of behavior change, all of which attempt to understand the influence of the built environment on physical activity, namely walking and cycling behavior.

Utility Maximizing theory – focuses on analyzing people’s travel behaviour choices for physical activity provided by the built environment (Handy, 2005; McFadden, 1974). For example, the built environment influences the individual’s choice to drive or to walk

Social Cognitive theory – Individuals, behaviour and the environment influence each other in a changeable interaction over time. As applied to ecological models (Sallis and Owen 2002), social cognitive theory explains the intrapersonal, interpersonal and environmental influences on active travel and other physical activity behaviour. This theory considers the characteristics of multiple levels of the built environment on a micro, meso, and macro scale that might influence behavior (Handy, 2005). For example, the theory takes into account the individual’s preference for walking or driving, the influence of other individual’s travel behaviour on the individual, as well as neighbourhood and community attributes – the presence of bike lanes or availability of amenities within walking distance, which may support or challenge walking and cycling behaviour.

New Urbanism (Rodriguez, Khattak, & Evenson, 2006) – is an approach to designing cities, towns, and neighbourhoods with the aim of reducing traffic and eliminating sprawl. This approach examines design characteristics' potential association with active travel behaviour and physical activity. It integrates mixed land use, high residential density, interconnected streets, a pedestrian friendly environment, and public gathering places to encourage an active life style and social life within the community.

LOCAL CONTEXT

The Central West Region of Ontario for the purpose of the walkON is comprised of the following: Brant, Haldimand-Norfolk, Halton Region, Niagara Region, Waterloo region and Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph. Characteristics of these municipalities include:

- Haldimand: mostly rural , no public transportation with a population of 45,212
- Norfolk: mostly rural, no public transportation with a population of 62,563
- Waterloo: rural and urban areas with a population of 507,000
- Brant County: mostly rural with no public transportation with a population of 116,000
- City of Brantford mostly urban with a population of 82,000
- Niagara: 12 municipalities with some rural and urban areas
- Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph: 16 municipalities with a mix of urban and rural areas. The population is 238,326
- Halton has 4 municipalities with most of the population living in urban centers. However, there continues to be a thriving rural community throughout the region. The population is approximately 450,000 with public transportation available in 2 out of the 4 communities.

Participating communities in Central West can be described as low-density towns, sub-urban, and rural areas. The region is a part of Ontario's heartland which is largely rural and agricultural. Due to urban sprawl, amalgamation of smaller communities, and commuting between communities for work and other activities, the Central West Region is highly car dependent. In recent years car dependency has been a topic of conversation among many community residents and walking advocates communities within the region, hence the initiation of the walkON model.

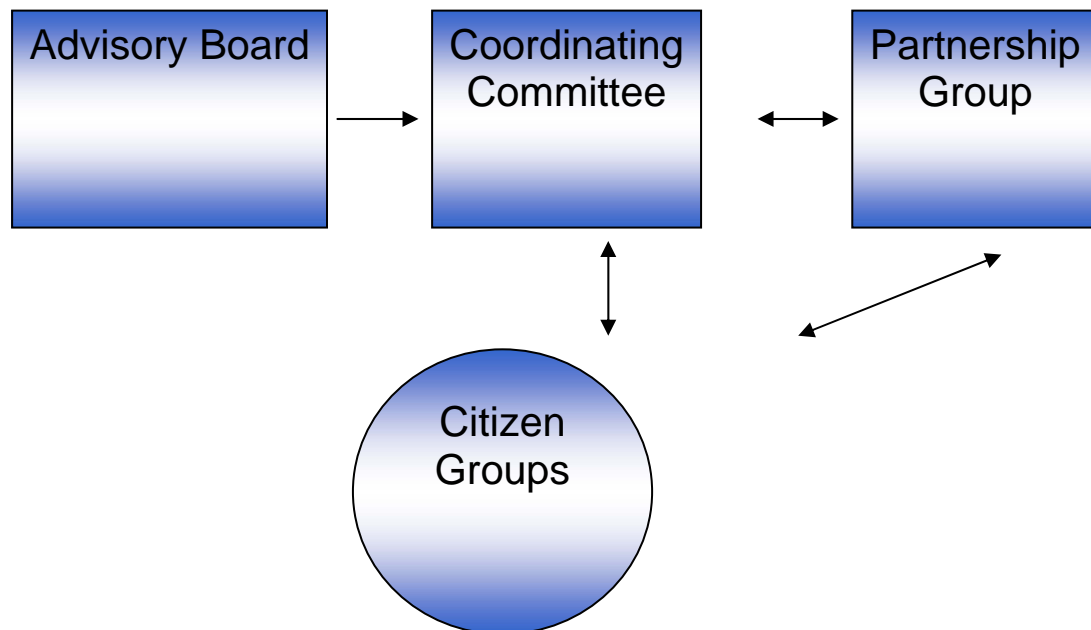
The participating communities that used the walkON model to make modifications to the existing environment through environmental supports and policy change. For example, in December 2005, the Town of Minto Council adopted policy regarding sidewalks. The policy provides for the construction of sidewalks when roadways are built or constructed at the developer's expense. In the same year, the City of Guelph unveiled the Guelph Trail Master Plan with the goal to *develop a cohesive city wide trail system that will connect people and places through a network that is off-road wherever possible and supported by on-road links where necessary*. For example, one of the recommendations addresses building walkability into new subdivisions by ensuring that new development(s) plan for efficient movement of people, which includes connections with main trails, destinations and linkages with other modes of transportation.

RESOURCE REQUIREMENTS

PERSONNEL

walkON is a partnership of Central West Ontario heart health projects that, together, have identified a need to support the development of walkable communities. The creation of walkable communities cannot be accomplished without the dedication and effort of many people. In 2006 and 2007, walkON focused on developing the Advisory Board, Partnership Group and establishing Membership Groups in each Central West community.

walkON Structure



- *Coordinating Committee:* This committee was comprised Heart Health Coordinators representing Health Units in the Central West region, a representative from the Ministry of Health promotion and a Project Manager. The Coordinating Committee met regularly to set the direction and make decisions to move the project forward. In addition, this group authorized budget expenditures, completed Ministry reports, ensure timely communication to local community partnerships, monitored and evaluated all project activities and explored opportunities for additional funding for walkON initiatives.

- *Advisory Board:* This board is an interdisciplinary team which provides technical expertise and informs the strategic direction of Walk ON. The Board includes representatives from a variety of sectors including planners, politicians, community services (recreation, parks/trails), health, transportation, safety, community members as well as various Ontario ministries.

- *Quality Partners:* Organizations who share the same values and commitment for encouraging an environment that supports walking. These organizations stay informed about walkON's activities by receiving regular communiqués and updates and are encouraged to share their activities with walkON. The vision is to have partners who will:

 - Drive the walkON message through their communication channels
 - Integrate walkON programs with initiatives they are running (cross promotion)
 - Provide input and suggestions around how walkON's program activities can be improve

- *Affiliates:* Key stakeholders in active living, active transportation, health, recreation, education and safety. Affiliates will not meet regularly but will receive regular updates from walkON, disseminate information to their respective groups, and keep walkON in the loop about their activities and initiatives.

- *Membership Groups:* Each community in the Central West region will be encouraged to form a local Membership Group, supported by walkON. walkON Membership Groups create

a vision based on the needs, priorities, and resources within their community. They work with councillors and city planners to implement active-living options and policies, promote the concept and benefits of walkable communities within their community, and link with the walkON Coordinating Committee. Citizen groups also participate at the community level to educate and increase awareness of and demand for walkable communities.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS AND CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

The following section highlights some of the lessons learned from walkON. The lessons learned discuss both the multiple successes and challenges of working within coalitions and partnerships and should be considered carefully by those involved with community driven initiatives that rely on building support to ensure success.

PARTNERSHIP AND COLLABORATION

Partnership and collaboration is a critical component of the walkON. Building partnerships with local stakeholders such as municipal planners, councilors, civic leaders, groups that promote physical activity, and community neighborhood associations is essential to program success. Building partnerships helps to build a broad base of support and to foster advocacy efforts for walkable communities.

An initial step in walkON was to identify potential partners. The Heart Health coordinators formed the core lead and initiated contacts with potential partners. Criteria for engaging partners included regional/provincial groups who share the same passion and commitment for walkable communities and compatibility with the vision and program objectives of walkON. In addition, framing the issue of walkability as one that touches on many sectors -- community design, health, and safety, for instance, encouraged multi-sectoral involvement.

Challenges of working with partners included a lack of clear roles for some partners. For some, there was a need to distinguish between their role as representatives of the Heart Health Coalition and their role as public health staff. Having a clear and shared vision, goals, and objectives will help assist in the identification of roles for partners. Some partners assumed roles such as champion, administrator of funds, and project advocate. Identification of roles helped partners to define the scope of their involvement in the partnership, the terms of their

engagement, and helped to maintain balance when there were competing interests among the various partners. Clear communication between the partner organizations and the coordinating committee is necessary to gain full support for the initiative, particularly with organizations that may not see their organizational mandate as aligning with the program's vision, goals, and mandates.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The information sessions served as a vehicle for active engagement of community members. Community members were also active in the Advisory Board and the Membership Groups in the local communities. Engaging key community members in supporting the walkON initiative is critical to its success at a local level. To foster community engagement, walkON developed a walkable communities checklist to help community members become aware of the walkability of their own community as a first step toward taking action.

CLEARLY COMMUNICATED VISION

The vision of a walkable community must be clearly articulated and then communicated effectively to all stakeholders. A clear vision helps to bind the program so that all actions and activities work toward achieving that vision. Clear communication of the vision can help to build support for the program. Within the vision, there should be room for interpretation and adaptation to allow it to be implemented to meet the needs of different communities. A small group in the initial stages can work to establish the vision which can then be revised as new partners get involved. However, at some point there has to be an agreement that the vision is complete and that subsequent partners share in the vision.

TIMING

The timing of walkON or related activity must consider whether or not a community is ready for change. Are the stakeholders available and interested in a walkability project? Does the community have the capacity to develop the program? Time management is another issue that impacts program development. Those involved must have the time to develop and implement the program, yet flexibility must also be built in to respond to competing priorities between represented organizations and the program partnership. It may be necessary for committee members to negotiate time with managers to meet task deadlines as specified in committee

workplans. Patience is needed to build partnerships, vision, project model, and to developing tools and outcomes.

References

Handy, S. 2005 *TRB Special Report 282: Does the Built Environment Influence Physical Activity? Examining the Evidence*. Paper prepared for the Transportation Research Board and the Institute of Medicine Committee on Physical Activity, Health, Transportation, and Land Use; Available at:
<http://onlinepubs.trb.org/onlinepubs/archive/downloads/sr282papers/sr282Handy.pdf>

McFadden, D. 1974. Conditional Logit Analysis of Qualitative Choice Behavior. In Zarembka, Paul (ed.). *Frontiers in Econometrics*, Academic Press, New York.

Rodriguez D, Khattak A and Evenson K. 2006. Can New Urbanism Encourage Physical Activity? Comparing a New Urbanist Neighborhood With Conventional Suburbs. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 72(1): 43–56

Sallis, J.F., Owen, N. 2002. Ecological models of health behavior. *Health Behavior and Health Education: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 3rd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 462-484.