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## Density is key to getting people to exercise more

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Last year Canada's Heart and Stroke Foundation took aim at the popular myth that living in the country or suburbs is better for your health.

The organization declared that the "suburban dream has gone sour," releasing evidence that clearly showed that car-dependent Canadians get far less physical activity and are at greater risk of being overweight or obese.

Smart Growth BC has gone even further in looking at how our built environment shapes our transportation choices and, in turn, human health.

Smart Growth BC is a non-government organization devoted to fiscally, socially and environmentally responsible land use and development. Staff work with community groups, businesses, municipalities and the public, advocating for the creation of more livable communities.

This past week the organization issued a report that pulls together the work of many researchers and the results of a number of past studies that look at how our sprawling development patterns have been correlated with higher body weights, obesity and the chronic diseases they cause.

Co-authored by Dr. Larry Frank at the University of B.C., Smart Growth BC's report is also a call to action with a number of land use policy and design recommendations.

Density -- that word dreaded in the suburbs -- is the key to providing transportation choice and getting people to walk more.

Each quartile increase in residential density corresponds with a 23-per-cent increase in the odds of walking for non-work travel, according to a recent Seattle study quoted in the report.

Of the leading causes of death in Canada, eight are potentially affected by sedentary lifestyles, air pollution or traffic crashes.

Of course, not all of these deaths result entirely from transportation-related activities, but many can be attributed to the amount of time people spend in their cars moving between their single-family homes in sub-divisions built too far apart and away from the services and amenities people need daily.

Studies also show that nearly all travel is done by car until residential density levels reach 13 persons per gross acre. Employment density levels of greater than 75 employees per gross acre are necessary before there is a substantial increase in transit and pedestrian travel for work trips.

There are policies we can put in place to encourage public transit ridership. Smart Growth BC's report points to the fact that in the short two years since its

inception, UBC's TREK Program, with a transit pass called the U-Pass, has increased transit use from 26 per cent in 2002 to 41 per cent in 2004.

The closer you are to the corner store the more chance you will walk, as well. Walking for non-work trips increased 19 per cent with each quartile increase in the number of retail establishments in the area, according to a King County 2005 study.

For those anxious to see the Port Mann Bridge and Highway 1 twinned, I draw your attention to a recent Seattle-area study highlighted in Smart Growth BC's report.

It concluded that reducing travel time and congestion levels for cars results in a lower proportion of trips on foot and transit.

This suggests that roadway expansions that alleviate congestion attract trips from other active and more sustainable modes and may actually undermine the health-related benefits of smart growth.

Another American study, based on nationwide travel survey data, found that transit users spend a median of 19 minutes daily walking to transit -- over half of the 30 daily minutes recommended by the Heart and Stroke Foundation.

Smart Growth BC also targets air pollution and water quality as measures of a health community. A King County study reported on the relationship between urban form and air quality, showing that a 25-per-cent increase in the over-all range of walkability within King County was associated with 6.5 per cent fewer vehicle miles travelled, 5.6 per cent fewer grams of oxides of nitrogen (NOx) and 5.5 per cent fewer grams of volatile organic compounds (VOC) per capita.

Smart Growth BC believes there is much that can be accomplished by educating policymakers, planners and consumers about how to create, evaluate and select healthier communities.

Their report provides some workable land use policy ideas together with neighbourhood and building design concepts that will help us build our communities and plan our transportation to foster the kind of behaviour that will make us healthier.

For further information on the report entitled Promoting Public Health Through Smart Growth visit [smartgrowth.bc.ca](http://smartgrowth.bc.ca)

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