



HEALTHY COMMUNITY DESIGN

# Policy Statements for Official Plans



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### PREFACE

Within these pages are a series of suggested policy statements and implementation activities related to land use, community design and public health. The Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit (SMDHU) offers these suggestions for policy direction in the hope that communities adopt them as part of their Official Plans and work programs to improve the health of their citizens.

Given the diversity and the mix of rural and urban communities within the health unit's jurisdiction, these suggestions have been developed to be as versatile as possible. The health unit suggests that incorporating the content of this document should be part of well defined strategies and community engagement processes so that it can fit the physical and social context of the community.

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*Ontario's long-term prosperity, environmental health and social well-being depend on wisely managing change and promoting efficient land use and development patterns. Efficient land use and development patterns support strong, liveable and healthy communities, protect the environment and public health and safety, and facilitate economic growth.*

*(Provincial Policy Statement 2005, Part V, 1.0 Building Strong Communities)*

### INTRODUCTION

Municipalities in Ontario face many challenges in planning for growth and development, including: working with changing population projections; developing land for a variety of uses; building to suit the needs of the population; protecting the environment; and planning for economic prosperity and a sustainable future. At the same time, municipalities must also ensure these planning decisions protect the health and well-being of their citizens.

Land use decisions and the way communities are designed have multiple impacts on people's lives, from how people get around to how they interact with their neighbours. The physical form of a community can impact its vitality, define its character and shape its ability to attract business and residents. It can also affect the overall physical and mental health of the people who live there.

Research has shown that the physical form and development patterns of a community have significant impact on air pollutants and greenhouse gases, water quality, levels of physical activity, social cohesion and rates of injuries and fatalities for motorists, pedestrians and cyclists.<sup>1</sup> The built environment affects the overall health of the community both negatively and positively in the following ways:

- **Environment** – The quality of our air and water affects our health. Community design and transportation planning can impact both of these critical requirements for health. Vehicle use and distances travelled all influence the amount of vehicle emissions, which are prime sources of air pollution affecting air quality and health. The design and layout of the built environment is critical in preserving water supplies and watersheds and ensure enough greenspace to allow for a natural and safe hydrological system, which affects water quality.
- **Injury and Safety** – The incidence of fatal and non-fatal injuries as a result of traffic crashes is closely related to vehicle miles traveled, automobile speed and traffic volumes. These characteristics of travel have been linked in research to the design of the roadway and street network and to the distribution of land uses.
- **Physical Activity** – The built environment can either facilitate or constrain our ability to be physically active for either recreational or utilitarian purposes. For example, neighbourhoods that are designed for the automobile can reduce the viability of active transportation, thus decreasing people's activity levels. This may contribute to increased rates of overweight, obesity and chronic disease in the population.
- **Sun Safety** – Skin cancer from sun exposure is increasing. Many communities are not designed with sun safety in mind and thus do not provide residents with natural and manmade structures for shelter from the sun.
- **Food Access** – The availability of fresh and affordable healthy foods at neighbourhood grocery stores and farmer's markets increases the chance that a person's nutritional intake will be healthier. However, many residential areas are not located within reasonable distance to a grocery store. Land use planning must also consider the protection and preservation of local food production capacity for the long-term health of the local food system.

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*The long-term prosperity and social well-being of Ontarians depend on maintaining strong communities, a clean and healthy environment and a strong economy... Strong, liveable and healthy communities enhance social well-being and are economically and environmentally sound.*  
(Provincial Policy Statement 2005, Part IV)

- Social Cohesion and Well-being – Certain characteristics of the built environment can influence how one feels about themselves and their connection to the community. These characteristics can also have a profound impact on the cohesiveness of a community and the creation of social capital.

Over the past decade, several key policies related to land use, development and growth planning in Ontario have come into effect. Two of these -- the Provincial Policy Statement (2005) and the Places to Grow - Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (2006) – provide clear direction on the creation of healthy and complete communities. The underlying principles within these policies are supportive of a municipal vision that addresses the importance of many public health concepts listed above.

These Provincial policies are also closely aligned with the goals of the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit's Building Healthy Communities initiative. Under this initiative, the health unit is working with partners to:

- 1 Act as a catalyst for change through programs, people and partnerships to achieve a shared vision of a built environment that promotes and protects health.
- 2 Provide strong public health leadership and expert health advice to key stakeholders to influence the design of new and existing communities to be sustainable and supportive of the achievement and maintenance of optimal health.

These goals have provided the impetus for the creation of this policy guide. The purpose of this document is to provide municipal planners, municipal elected officials and other stakeholders and partners in Simcoe Muskoka with suggestions for Official Plan policies that will assist municipalities in creating healthy and complete communities while also meeting the Provincial policies.

The document has five sections that are based on key health issues impacted by the built environment: environment; injury and safety; physical activity and sun safety; food access; and social cohesion and well-being. Each section contains an overall health-related goal and rationale, a number of related objectives, suggested planning policies to help achieve the objectives and suggested strategies for implementation of the policies.

It will be up to each individual municipality to consider these policy and implementation suggestions and to determine the feasibility of including them in its Official Plan and other municipal strategies. Municipalities are encouraged to use the concepts within this document and to freely adapt, amend or revise the wording to suit their particular needs and circumstances. This is by no means a complete list and should therefore be viewed as a starting point.

As the built environment has a variety of crossover effects on various components of health, many of the policy suggestions included in the document have the potential to achieve multiple benefits to the community. It will take the support, energy and assets of the entire community at various times, and for various initiatives, to create healthy places to live. In doing so, this collaborative effort can support visions for healthy communities and fulfill the requirements of Provincial policy.

*This Plan is about building complete communities, whether urban or rural. These are communities that are well-designed, offer transportation choices, accommodate people at all stages of life and have the right mix of housing, a good range of jobs, and easy access to stores and services to meet daily needs.*  
(Places to Grow - Growth Plan 2006, p. 13)