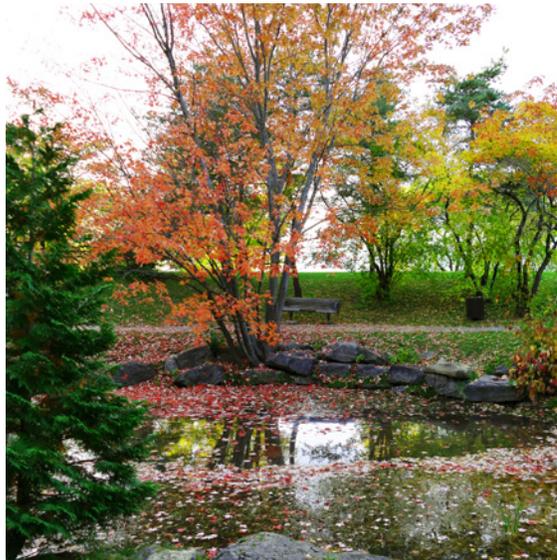




# MAPPING THE MUNICIPAL PLANNING PROCESS IN ONTARIO

Opportunities for Public Health Input



## About

This report is the result of the Locally Driven Collaborative Project (LDCP) program, which brings Ontario Public Health Units together to conduct research on issues of shared interest related to the Ontario Public Health Standards.

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# CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Neighbourhood Design &amp; Food System</b>	<b>6</b>
PROVINCIAL PLANS & POLICIES	7
MUNICIPAL PLANS & GUIDELINES	7
Official Plan	
Elective Plans & Guidelines	
PROJECT-SPECIFIC	8
<b>Natural Environment</b>	<b>10</b>
PROVINCIAL PLANS & POLICIES	11
MUNICIPAL PLANS & GUIDELINES	11
Source Water Protection Plans	
Elective Plans & Guidelines	
PROJECT-SPECIFIC	11
Environmental Assessments	
Green Development Standards	
Conservation Authority Review	
<b>Transportation</b>	<b>13</b>
PROVINCIAL PLANS & POLICIES	14
MUNICIPAL PLANS & GUIDELINES	14
PROJECT-SPECIFIC	14
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>15</b>



Cobourg Waterfront, Cobourg, ON; Copyright Queen's Printer for Ontario, photo source: Ontario Growth Secretariat, Ministry of Municipal Affairs

# INTRODUCTION

Where we live affects how healthy we are. With evidence of the built and natural environment's impacts on health well-established, public health professionals are increasingly looking for ways to engage with the planning process to improve community design for health. This report maps out the planning process in Ontario and identifies opportunities for public health input. It is intended as a tool to guide public health units and help them achieve community design that protects and promotes health.

This work is part of a larger Locally Driven Collaborative Project on healthy built and natural environments that collected promising practices from across Ontario. More findings can be found at [PlanningForHealth.ca](http://PlanningForHealth.ca)

## Methodology

A literature review identified four spheres where the built environment impacts health: Neighbourhood Design, Food System, Natural Environment and Transportation. The types of impacts and interventions described within each sphere were reviewed and corresponding planning tools which would influence positive or negative outcomes were identified. At this stage, significant overlap was found between planning tools to address Neighbourhood Design and those related to the Food System, and a decision was made to combine these two for the purposes of mapping the municipal planning process. Three scales of land use planning were identified: Provincial Plans & Policies, Municipal Plans & Guidelines, and Project-Specific. A map was created, showing the applicable planning tools across these three scales and the four spheres drawn from the literature review. Opportunities for public health input were identified on this map. This document was then developed to review the applicable planning tools in more detail. The map can be found in Figure 1.

## Ontario's Municipal Planning Process

	Provincial Plans & Policies	Municipal Plans & Guidelines	Project - Specific
Neighbourhood Design and Food System	Provincial Policy Statement Growth Plans <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe</li> <li>• Growth Plan for Northern Ontario</li> </ul>	Required: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Official Plan</li> </ul> Elective: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secondary Plans</li> <li>• Community Improvement Plans</li> <li>• Urban Design Guidelines</li> <li>• Tall Building Guidelines</li> <li>• Town-house and Low-Rise Apartment Guidelines</li> <li>• Priority Neighbourhood Plans</li> <li>• and more</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plan of Subdivision</li> <li>• Site Plan</li> <li>• Official Plan or Zoning By-law Amendment</li> <li>• Review of Urban Design Guidelines</li> <li>• Noise Impact Study</li> <li>• Sun/shade Study</li> <li>• Community Services and Facilities Study</li> <li>• and more</li> </ul>
Natural Environment	Greenbelt <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greenbelt Plan</li> <li>• Niagara Escarpment Plan</li> <li>• Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan</li> </ul>	Required: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Source Water Protection Plans</li> </ul> Elective: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Park and Greenspace Strategy</li> <li>• Climate Change Action Plan</li> <li>• Urban Forest Management Plan</li> <li>• and more</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Environmental Assessments (Individual, Streamlined and Class)</li> <li>• Green Development Standards (GDS)</li> <li>• Review of development applications by Conservation Authorities (if applicable)</li> </ul>
Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regional Transportation Plan (Metrolinx, covers the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area)</li> <li>• Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH) Transportation Plan (provincial government)</li> <li>• Northern Ontario Multimodal Transportation Strategy (provincial government)</li> </ul>	Elective: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transportation Master Plan</li> <li>• Active Transportation/Cycling Plan</li> <li>• Complete Streets Guidelines</li> <li>• Road Safety Plan</li> <li>• and more</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Environmental Assessments (Individual, Streamlined and Class)</li> <li>• Plan of Subdivision</li> <li>• Site Plan</li> <li>• Transportation Impact Study</li> <li>• Multimodal level of service analysis</li> <li>• Air Quality Study</li> </ul>
Opportunity for Health Input	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creation and updates of provincial plans and policies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provincial review of municipal official plans and amendments (opportunity for Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care).</li> <li>• Creation and updates of municipal plans &amp; guidelines.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review development applications and environmental assessments.</li> <li>• Review the requirements for development applications and environmental assessments, and recommend additional, health-focussed evaluations.</li> </ul>

Figure 1: Opportunities for Public Health Input in Ontario's Municipal Planning Process



Talwood Community Garden, Peterborough, ON, photo source: Francis Nasca

# NEIGHBOURHOOD DESIGN & FOOD SYSTEM

**The way we design our neighbourhoods can impact physical activity levels by either supporting or reducing the viability of healthy transportation options. In a compact, mixed use neighbourhood, destinations for work, school, shopping, services and entertainment are walkable or bikeable, and people can easily incorporate physical activity into their daily lives. Low density neighbourhoods where residential uses have been separated from other land uses encourage car dependence and add sedentary time to people's lives.**

**Less obvious but equally important is the impact the built environment has on the food system, and people's access to healthy food options. Separating residential areas from commercial land uses can create 'food deserts,' residential neighbourhoods that lack local grocery stores and food markets. If affordable and convenient transportation options are also lacking, low income residents can end up relying on convenience stores and fast food restaurants to meet daily food needs. Strategies such as changing zoning regulations, allowing pop-up food markets, and encouraging urban agriculture can all help improve access to healthy food.**

**From a planning perspective, these two issues of neighbourhood design and food system can be addressed using similar mechanisms, and so we discuss them together in this section.**

# Provincial Plans & Policies

In Canada's constitution, municipalities are described as "creatures of the province," meaning that the provincial government has the power to create or dissolve municipalities and assign powers to them through legislation. One of the powers that Ontario has granted its municipalities is local land use planning, as set out in the Planning Act. Although locally-based, this process is guided by a series of provincial policies, with which municipal planning decisions must be consistent or conform. As illustrated in Figure 1, these provincial policies make up the first stage of the municipal planning process. Six key documents currently guide local land use planning; the Provincial Policy Statement is province-wide, while the other five provincial plans apply to specific geographic areas within the province. All six documents fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

Overall, these policies and plans take a Smart Growth approach by directing growth to urban

centres, setting urban growth boundaries, and encouraging complete communities. They address many characteristics of healthy communities identified through the literature review, such as access to transit, mixed land use, compact neighbourhoods, density, and urban sprawl.

Revisions and updates to these documents offer a powerful opportunity to influence land use planning across the province. Because municipal planning decisions must be consistent with the provincial policy and conform to provincial plans, any healthy community design elements included in provincial policy documents will be reflected in official plans at the municipal level and development proposals at the project-specific level. Public health units can participate in consultation processes led by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing to provide input on provincial policies when they are being updated.

## Municipal Plans & Guidelines

### ■ Official Plan

The second stage of the planning process consists of municipal plans and guidelines and is divided into two categories: those required by the Province, and those that are elective. In the required category, the official plan is a municipality's most important land use planning tool. It is enabled through the Planning Act (1990) and overseen by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. Through policies and maps, it sets the parameters for development, establishing where growth will occur within a municipality and where different land uses will be located. The official plan is implemented through a municipality's zoning by-law, which gives detailed instructions on a parcel-by-parcel basis regarding what can and cannot be built (type of use, size of building, setback

from the roadway, etc.). Official plans are closely tied to provincial policies and must demonstrate consistency with the Provincial Policy Statement and conformity to all applicable provincial plans.

Official plans have an enormous impact on neighbourhood design and the food system. Because they set out how land uses will be distributed throughout the municipality, they determine neighbourhood walkability, including access to local amenities, grocery stores and healthy food sources, and greenspace. An official plan will also direct growth to certain areas of a city, and the zoning by-law will further clarify how dense a neighbourhood will be. As established through the literature review, compact

neighbourhoods with sufficient population density to support mixed land uses and transit are significant elements of healthy neighbourhood design.

In northern Ontario, large areas exist which are not organized into municipalities and where much of the land belongs to the Crown. In these areas, land use planning is shared between planning boards, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry. Planning boards are made up of representatives from any municipalities that exist within their planning area, as well as representatives from areas without municipal organization, who are appointed by the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing. The planning board can adopt official plans and pass zoning by-laws for their planning area and may have additional powers delegated to

them (i.e. administer a Minister's zoning order, approve plans of subdivision).

Two opportunities exist for health input into official plans. A municipality must either update its official plan through an amendment every five years or create a new official plan every ten years, and extensive consultations are part of this process. In addition, because of the requirements for conformity and consistency with provincial plans and policies, the Province reviews all new official plans and all official plan amendments. As part of this review process, ministries outside of the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing have the opportunity to provide comments on the plans (the 'One Window Approach'). The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care has recently become part of this review process.

## ■ Elective Plans & Guidelines

Municipalities also create many plans and guidelines that are not required by the Province, but which provide more specific direction than the official plan on a wide variety of topics. A few of these plans, such as secondary plans and community improvement plans, are enabled through the Planning Act and bear the same weight as the official plan. They allow the municipality to undertake more detailed planning work in areas undergoing significant change or to unlock specific funding mechanisms to revitalize a neighbourhood.

Other documents, such as urban design guidelines and tall building guidelines,

act more as visioning documents, laying out best practices on a specific topic. These documents are used in negotiations with developers during the development proposal process. As these documents become increasingly focused in terms of topic and geographic scale, the opportunity exists for them to include very specific direction on healthy neighbourhood design elements, including accessibility, age-friendly infrastructure, street connectivity and streetscaping. The creation and adoption of these plans typically involves extensive consultation, where public health units can play a significant role.

## Project - Specific

The final stage of the municipal planning process is the development proposal and review. At this stage, the geographic scope has narrowed to a single parcel of land, although the scale may vary from a single dwelling

to an entire subdivision. Depending on the scale of the proposed project, and whether it conforms to existing municipal policies and regulations, the proponent may need to submit a request for amendments to the official plan

or zoning bylaws. A site plan which provides a detailed overview of the proposal, including building height and size, design features, setbacks, entrances and exits, parking, and landscaping, may be required, depending on the municipality's provisions. If a parcel of land is to be divided up into multiple smaller properties, a form of land division such as a plan of subdivision, plan of condominium, part lot control exemption or consent to sever will be required.

A municipality may also request additional information from the proponent, such as review of urban design guidelines, a transportation impact study, a noise impact study, a sun/shade study, or a community services and facilities study. The proposal is reviewed by the municipality's planning department, who may also choose to circulate it to other city divisions, such as engineering and construction, transportation, parks, urban design, waste services, fire, utilities, and public health. At this stage, there is also a requirement for public consultation and a duty to consult affected indigenous groups. Once the review phase is complete, the proposal is voted on by council. In

some municipalities, decision-making authority for certain types of applications has been delegated to staff, unless a councillor requests a council vote.

As there are many ways to design a building and many ways to interpret policy, the process is a negotiation between the municipality, who is looking to achieve a variety of public interest goals, and the proponent, who must always consider the financial viability of the project. While some aspects of a project will be more clearly determined, many decisions will still need to be made, guided by a municipality's policies and guidelines. Input from public health can give added weight in these negotiations to feedback related to achieving a healthy built environment.

Since all municipal planning decisions must be consistent with the Provincial Policy Statement and conform to applicable provincial plans, the content and interpretation of these documents becomes critical at this stage. Strong, clear directives from the Province and in Official Plans in support of healthy neighbourhood design will make these outcomes more assured project to project.

Downtown Hamilton, Hamilton, ON; Copyright Queen's Printer for Ontario, photo source: Ontario Growth Secretariat, Ministry of Municipal Affairs





Muskoka Wharf, Gravenhurst, ON, photo source: Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit

## NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

**A healthy natural environment is important for the overall health of the community. Our health benefits from access to clean air and water, and access to parks, waterfront and nature for recreation and physical activity. Research has found that several chronic diseases, including obesity and cardiovascular disease, are reduced with accessible green space and that green space also supports mental health through the reduction of symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression. The natural environment also plays a role in climate change mitigation and resiliency by reducing the likelihood of flooding, improving air quality and providing shade, all of which have health co-benefits<sup>1</sup>. As this section demonstrates, various governmental bodies are involved in ensuring a healthy natural environment through different policies.**

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<sup>1</sup> Kingsley, M. & EcoHealth Ontario. (2019). Commentary – Climate change, health and green space co-benefits. *Health Promotion and Chronic Disease Prevention in Canada*, 39.4 . Retrieved from [Public Health Canada](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/chronic-disease-prevention/39-4.html).

# Provincial Plans & Policies

At the provincial level, the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks contributes to the development of provincial plans to protect the Greenbelt, led by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. Currently, three such plans exist in Ontario: the Greenbelt Plan, Niagara Escarpment Plan, and

Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan. The Greenbelt works in conjunction with the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, to direct growth and provide protection to agricultural land, as well as ecological and hydrological features.

## Municipal Plans & Guidelines

### ■ Source Water Protection Plans

On the regional scale, the Province requires source water protection plans. After the Walkerton tragedy in 2000, where the contamination of drinking water with *E. coli* killed six people, the Ontario government passed the Clean Water Act (2006), with the aim of taking a preventative approach to protecting ground and surface water sources. Nineteen watershed-based source protection committees have been set up across the province, with membership from municipalities, public agencies, business and indigenous groups. Representatives

from local public health units sit on these committees in a non-voting, advisory capacity. Together, these committees have developed 38 local source protection plans which identify drinking water sources and develop strategies to mitigate threats, such as from agriculture, new development, resource extraction, or infrastructure projects. These plans focus on municipal drinking water sources, however, and do not provide protection for private wells – the source of drinking water for an estimated 1.6 million Ontarians<sup>2</sup>.

### ■ Elective Plans & Guidelines

Municipalities may also choose to create various other environmental plans to guide municipal activities. These plans may be mentioned in the Official Plan as providing further detail in support of an Official Plan policy, but they are not required by the Province. The topics they cover may include many that important to healthy built environments including equitable access to parks and waterfront,

urban agriculture, the location of street trees, and emissions reduction. Examples include a Parks and Greenspace Strategy, a Climate Change Action Plan, and an Urban Forest Management Plan. The process of developing these plans generally includes consultation.

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<sup>2</sup> Ontario Auditor General. (2016). *Source water protection*. In *Ontario Auditor General Report* (pp. 156–167). Toronto, ON: Office of the Auditor General of Ontario. Retrieved from [Auditor General of Ontario](#).

# Project - Specific

## ■ Environmental Assessments

Environmental Assessments (EAs) are intended to ensure that environmental effects are considered before a public project begins. Although they operate at the level of specific projects, the project proponent could be a municipality, a provincial ministry or a public body such as a conservation authority or Metrolinx. Types of projects requiring EAs include: roads and highways, transit, waste management, water and waste water, and flood protection.

There are two types of EAs: individual and streamlined. Individual EAs are required for large-scale, complex projects that have potentially significant environmental impacts. They require approval from the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks. Streamlined EAs are intended for routine projects that have predictable and manageable environmental effects.

The process is a self-assessment that aids in decision-making. It does not require ministerial approval, as long as the approved assessment process is followed and no request is made for a more in-depth assessment (called a Part II Order). Streamlined EAs can be used for certain electricity, waste management and transit projects, as well as any project which falls under a Class EA. For a Class EA, an assessment process has been pre-approved for a set of similar, routine projects. Currently, an environmental assessment process has been approved for 11 classes of projects in Ontario, including GO Transit, municipal infrastructure (roads, sewage, water), provincial highways, and public works. Regardless of the type (individual, streamlined, class), EAs always involve opportunities for input from the public, other government bodies and indigenous communities.

Markham, ON, photo source: Midhat Malik



## ■ Green Development Standards

A growing number of Ontario municipalities have implemented Green Development Standards (GDS). The authority to do so comes from the Planning Act, which enables municipalities to require development projects to include exterior sustainable design elements as part of the site plan approval process. In order to implement these standards, the municipality must include enabling language in their Official Plan, which requires an Official Plan amendment (see the Town of Richmond Hill's Official Plan as an example).

Municipalities have taken a variety of approaches with their standards, but generally the goals include improving air quality, reducing the urban heat island effect, reducing energy use and greenhouse gas emissions, reducing storm water runoff

and water consumption, and protecting and enhancing natural features. Example standards include requiring a certain percentage of the site's exterior surface area to be pervious, to be shaded, or to have vegetation, requiring a certain number of bike parking spaces per unit, and requiring pedestrian-scaled lighting (see the Toronto Green Standard).

Meeting the standards may be mandatory, voluntary or incentivized, depending on the municipality. Incentives take the form of reductions in the development charges paid to the municipality, due to the fact that the development is less taxing on stormwater and other municipal systems. Some municipalities have created a tiered system, where the first tier is mandatory, and additional tiers are voluntary and incentivized.

## ■ Conservation Authority Review

Conservation Authorities are local watershed management agencies that protect and manage impacts on water and other natural resources. Thirty-one Conservation Authorities operate in southern Ontario, and five in northern Ontario, covering 95% of Ontario's population. Under Section 28 of the Conservation Authorities Act (2006), any development proposed in a river or

stream valley, along the shoreline of a lake, on hazardous land, or near watercourses or wetlands may require approval from the local Conservation Authority, to ensure that the project will not interfere with flood management or conservation efforts. This approval process appears to be internal, with no opportunity for external input or review.



Bike lane on Vickers Street, Thunder Bay, ON, photo source: Thunder Bay District Health Unit

## TRANSPORTATION

Transportation systems play a significant role in public health. Safe pedestrian and cycling infrastructure provides people of all ages and abilities with the opportunity to walk and cycle to their destinations, adding physical activity into their activities of daily living. Active transportation can also support transit by providing first and last mile linkages. When the transportation system in a community is sustainable, it also contributes to reducing air pollution, and helps improve air quality and respiratory health. This section will explore transportation policies at different levels of the government and how they influence healthy built environment outcomes.

# Provincial Plans & Policies

The Provincial Policy Statement and provincial plans released by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing include municipal directives related to transportation, such as population and employment densities around transit stations and adopting a complete streets approach to road re-design.

In addition, the Ministry of Transportation develops regional transportation plans, as does Metrolinx, a provincial agency with a mandate to improve transportation in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA). Unlike the Provincial Policy Statement and the provincial plans, these transportation plans have no legislated power to require consistency or conformity from municipalities. Consequently, these plans generally focus on provincial-level networks (highways, commuter transit), and rely on collaborations with municipalities to make local network connections.

In 2008, Metrolinx developed The Big Move, the first regional transportation plan for the GTHA. In spring 2018, an updated plan was released, called 2041 Regional Transportation Plan. The plan explicitly sets sustainable and healthy communities as one of its goals. Strategies include connecting more of the

region with frequent rapid transit and integrating transportation and land use planning. The plan also covers active transportation to work, school and transit; however, in December 2018, the objectives of Metrolinx were revised to focus exclusively on transit, ending the agency's work in this area.

The Ministry of Transportation is developing two regional transportation plans: one for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (which includes the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area), and one for northern Ontario, called the Northern Ontario Multimodal Transportation Strategy. The draft Transportation Plan for the GGH covers healthy, active living themes in its objectives, such as supporting walking and cycling, increasing access to transit and reducing dependence on personal vehicles. The draft Northern Ontario Multimodal Transportation Strategy focuses on increasing the reliability of connections to northern communities for people and for goods. Health-focused goals include reducing transportation-related emissions, improving safety, increasing cycling opportunities and encouraging compact urban form in major centers. Consultations for both draft plans took place in 2017, but the plans have not yet been finalized.

# Municipal Plans & Guidelines

Municipal plans are required to be consistent with the Provincial Policy Statement and conform to any applicable growth plans. Although released by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing rather than the Ministry of Transportation, these policy documents do give some direction on transportation. For example, higher population and employment densities are required around transit station areas, and municipalities are required to adopt a complete streets approach to road design.

Outside of the growth plans and Provincial Policy Statement, there is no legislated requirement for municipal transportation plans to align with provincial level transportation plans. Indeed,

there is no requirement for municipalities to have a transportation plan at all. This disconnect can make it difficult to plan integrated services; for example, while Metrolinx controls GO transit, it has no jurisdiction over local transit connections, or cycling and walking routes to the station except on its own property.

Although not required, many municipalities do create transportation plans including master plans, active or sustainable transportation plans, transit plans, cycling network plans, Complete Street guidelines, and road safety plans. To develop these plans, municipalities generally undertake extensive consultation.

# Project - Specific

As mentioned above, municipal and provincial transportation infrastructure projects are subject to the environmental assessment process, affording an opportunity to review and comment from a public health perspective.

As part of the municipal development proposal application process, municipal planning departments may request a number of transportation-related studies, the most common of which is a transportation impact study. The plan of subdivision (if required) will contain information about roads, sidewalks and bike lanes, as well as potentially the positioning of parks, schools, shops and residences. The site plan will also have transportation implications on a smaller scale, including the positioning of walkways, entrances and exits, and parking. Traditionally these documents have focused on facilitating car access and throughput, through such features as front door pick up/drop off zones, generous turn radii,

wide lane widths, and signal re-timings. There is an opportunity, however, to create significant change in the built environment and the health of our communities through the development review process by advocating for better-placed schools, prioritized, safe access to bike parking, continuous sidewalks and other features that facilitate active transportation. Because the development proposal process falls under land use planning, comments should reference the Provincial Policy Statement and the growth plans, with which all municipal land use planning decisions must align.

Queen Elizabeth Drive, Ottawa, ON, photo source: City of Ottawa





Petrie Island, Ottawa, ON, photo source: City of Ottawa

# CONCLUSION

Ontario's provincial and municipal planning frameworks are intended to ensure that community design protects the public interest. In this report, we have outlined the planning process with a health lens, in order to identify opportunities for public health input on both the municipal and provincial scales.

Some public health units are already engaging in local planning processes through the review of plans and policies, individual projects, and internal processes. They have built productive relationships with municipal planning and transportation staff, and have grown their own capacity to provide evidence-based input on built environment issues. As part of this Locally Driven Collaborative Project, we gathered promising practices from across Ontario of ways public health units are working with communities to achieve built and natural environments that

protect and promote health. The results of this research can be found on the website [www.PlanningForHealth.ca](http://www.PlanningForHealth.ca). We hope that practitioners and public health units who are just starting a conversation around healthy built environments, as well as those who are already deeply engaged will find these resources helpful.