

Healthier Built Environments

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The Region of Peel is one of Canada’s largest municipalities, with 1.2-million people calling Peel home. It is also one of Ontario’s fastest-growing regions, adding about 20,000 new residents each year supported by significant land development on the urban periphery. The region comprises the City of Mississauga, the City of Brampton and the Town of Caledon. Each municipality presents a unique land development challenge: predominantly infill development in Mississauga, a combination of infill and greenfield development in Brampton, and a combination of greenfield and rural development in Caledon.

In 2005, the Peel Region departments of Public Health and Planning presented a joint report to council entitled, *Overweight, Obesity and Related Health Consequences in Adults*, which highlighted the impact of the built environment on Peel residents’ health. In response, council directed Peel Public Health and planning staff to work together to research and make recommendations for planning policies and processes that provide greater opportunity for active living. In addition, council directed Peel Public Health to comment on development applications circulated within the region to improve the health-promoting potential of Peel neighbourhoods. As a result, Peel Public Health undertook several initiatives to foster healthier land use development patterns, including:

- Literature review on health and the built environment;
- Creation of an active transportation steering committee to study the active transportation infrastructure in Peel;
- Creation of a land-use planning and health steering committee;
- Development of a conceptual model depicting relationships between health and the built environment;
- Engaging municipal planners to provide health-related comments on municipal secondary and block plans, as well as other applications as deemed appropriate.

A thorough review of the literature on the relationship between health and the built environment identified the built environment as a strong determinant of health, but quickly exposed a dearth of best practice guidelines to support specific changes to built environments to mitigate health impacts. As a consequence, initial efforts to provide municipalities with input on their development proposals consisted of mostly narrative, qualitative comments, which failed to effect change.

To further understand the complex interaction between health and planning, Peel Public Health commissioned a systems analyst to develop a set of conceptual models

Official Plan Policy Development

Document	Policy #	Intent
Peel Regional Official Plan Amendment 24	7.9.2.9	The region will prepare an <u>assessment tool to evaluate the public health impacts of development</u> , jointly with the area municipalities
	7.9.2.10	The region will work jointly with the area municipalities to <u>raise public awareness of the health impacts</u> related to planning through public and private partnerships
Peel Regional Official Plan Amendment 25	7.3.6.2.2	The region <u>may require health impact studies</u> as part of a complete development application to amend the regional official plan
Caledon Official Plan Amendment 226	7.9.2.3	The region may <u>develop public health indicators</u> to analyze the effectiveness of Official Plan policies and serve as a basis for policy adjustments
	4.1.10.3.2	The town will participate jointly with the Region of Peel and area municipalities in the <u>preparation of an assessment tool for evaluating the public health impacts of development proposals</u>
	4.1.10.3.3	The town will work jointly with the Region of Peel and area municipalities to <u>raise awareness of public health issues related to planning</u>
Mississauga draft Official Plan	19.3.5	The city may require <u>health impact studies</u> as part of a complete development application
	19.3.7	The city requires all development applications to <u>have regard for public health</u>

that visually depict the effects of urban form on the health of populations. Along with the literature review, these conceptual models provide further strength that specific attributes of the built environment (e.g., density, street connectivity, land use mix, proximity and neighbourhood design) contribute to poor health outcomes.

The conceptual models, stakeholder consultations, municipal response to health-related comments on development proposals, and review of planning policies and processes revealed two key next steps: (1) a need to strengthen the effect of health comments through more specific quantifiable assessments and recommendations, and (2) a need to create and strengthen policy at all levels of the planning policy hierarchy to support implementation of quantifiable health assessments and recommendations. With further direction from regional council to develop policies on the relationship between health and the built environment for the regional official plan, Peel Public Health worked with municipal planners to integrate health language into the regional and local official plans.

Consequently, Peel Public Health recognized the need for consistent health-based rationale to guide planning decisions and partnered with leading researchers in the field of health and urban planning to develop the Peel Healthy Development Index. The index is a set of development standards for evaluating land development applications with a health focus. It uses quantifiable benchmarks for each land use element that affects health, based on relationships documented in the literature. Researchers at the Centre for Research on Inner City Health at St. Michael's Hospital developed the index to conform to existing provincial standards and meet local targets, but also to go above and beyond those targets where possible to shift development practices into healthier patterns. Made up of two parts designed to be used in tandem—evaluation tool and scorecard—the index can be used to evaluate proposed communities at all stages of the planning process. The Healthy Development Index is now being pilot tested against Peel's existing context, to create an implementation plan that can fit the unique needs of each of the three municipalities within the region.

As a result of the Healthy Development Index and policy development efforts, Peel has experienced a number of successes:

- Peel Region and the local municipalities have incorporated policies into the regional and local official plans to encourage health-promoting land use and transportation planning;
- In collaboration with the Planning Department, Peel Public Health has provided input to the *Provincial Policy Statement*

to explicitly identify the relationship between planning and health throughout the document and thereby set the framework for considering the health impacts of planning at the local level;

- In collaboration with the Planning Department, Peel Public Health has provided input to the Ministry of Transportation's Transit Supportive Guidelines to explicitly cite health as a strong rationale for transit-supportive planning and for creating increased opportunities for active transportation;
- Peel Region is currently developing an active transportation plan which provides for multi-purpose pathways, bicycle lanes and integration of trail networks to provide increased opportunities for an active lifestyle;
- Peel Public Health has provided input on right-of-way discussions for regional roads to ensure opportunities for

pedestrian-friendly environments such as land width/buffer zone reduction and off-road bicycle lanes;

- Peel Public Health has joined forces with the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada, Urban Public Health Network, Canadian Institute of Planners and five other health units within three provinces to develop tools for measuring the health impacts of planning and advance policies



Enhanced walkability through streetscape design

that encourage health-promoting land use development;


- Peel Planning Department and Public Health have formalized their relationship and regularly engage with each other through roundtable discussions on relevant development proposals.

Throughout the process of developing policy and health assessment tools, Peel Region has engaged extensively with key stakeholders such as the development industry, local municipalities, conservation authorities and school boards. Through consultations with these stakeholders, Peel Public Health and Planning Department learned that for any quantifiable health assessment to be well-integrated into the planning process, it must be applied at different stages of the approval process. Currently, municipalities require land developers to conduct background studies to identify the positive and negative impacts to communities created by proposed developments. However, no background study requirement exists to assess the broader impacts to health beyond safety (such as physical activity). As an additional method to identify opportunities to increase the health-promoting potential of proposed developments, Peel Public Health is currently developing the framework and content for a health background study with the assistance of the Planning Partnership. Building on the evidence-

based standards set by the Healthy Development Index, the background study is intended to be implemented at an early stage of the planning process.

A shift in planning practices that have become the norm over the past century requires a clear vision, a strong commitment and an understanding that change will take quite a long time. Peel Region recognizes the need for environmental changes and a shift in cultural norms to stop the spread of the chronic disease epidemic, and plans to stay committed to the cause. Through the index and background study, the forging of new partnerships, and the development of tailored policies, Peel Region is paving the way for major strides in improving community design to enhance the way we live and the places we call home.

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