



Prescription

A Healthy Transportation System

What does health have to do with transit? The lack of transportation options hurts our health. A healthy transportation system for everyone equals a healthy population. This is a critical time for transportation funding and investment.

Investment in transportation in the region is urgently needed

Recently, decision makers at Queen's Park heard from Metrolinx about how the province should move forward with funding a regional transportation system for the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA). But the decision is far from made – the provincial government has now struck an advisory panel to consult and consider the options. Increasingly, health leaders are adding their voices to the chorus of civic and business leaders supporting immediate transit expansion and investment in the GTHA.

Although there is strong consensus that inadequate transportation infrastructure has major economic, environmental, and social costs, few have taken a deeper look at how much our lack of transportation options has hurt our health. The health effects are significant: respiratory diseases linked to poor air quality; complications of physical inactivity such as obesity, cardiovascular disease and diabetes; and unfair health burdens caused by unequal access to transportation systems.

The price tag for the health impacts is staggering. The health impacts of traffic-related air pollution alone cost nearly \$2 billion a year. Add to this a built environment that discourages physical activity and makes active transportation difficult and at times risky. Physical inactivity and obesity cost the GTHA about \$4 billion a year in direct health care costs and indirect costs such as lost productivity. A comprehensive transportation system would greatly reduce these costs. When we consider the \$2 billion annual investment required to fund Metrolinx's expansion, this cost must be weighed against the billions saved in lost time, lost productivity and health costs. It's time for decision makers to prioritize our health by supporting the new transportation investments the GTHA needs now. That's why we have joined together to share our prescriptions for the healthy transportation system we need.

A transportation system that reduces pollution and promotes healthy choices

A comprehensive transportation plan will provide immediate health benefits from pollution prevention. Furthermore, it will improve health by changing our built environments. Research shows that people who live in walkable and bikeable neighbourhoods have better health outcomes than people who live in car-oriented communities. Obesity levels are directly related to transportation mode share: the more people walk, cycle and take transit, the lower a country's obesity rates. The health evidence shows that physical activity from active transportation has other important health benefits too, including significantly reducing the risks of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and certain types of cancer.

The health choices we make depend on the choices that are available to us. A regional transit network would give many Ontarians a viable alternative to using cars – an option that does not exist for many. Today, 60% of Ontarians do not meet recommended levels of daily physical activity. More accessible transit and local investments in active transportation infrastructure would go a long way toward helping more of us meet our daily physical activity needs by walking or biking that “last kilometre” home from the transit station. When coupled with good access to public transit, fees that support transit investments can also support healthy decisions. Thoughtfully implemented revenue measures such as parking levies and fuel taxes can support healthy choices by making transit, walking and cycling as affordable and convenient as driving.

A transportation system that is fair

The evidence shows that unequal societies are sicker than more equal ones. Those at the lower end of an income gradient face greater health risks than those at the top and tend to have the poorest access to healthy transportation options, including public transit. A fair transportation system levels the playing field by ensuring that no matter their income, women and men, young children and senior citizens, new immigrants and established residents, able bodied people and those with mobility challenges can get to work, to school, to medical appointments, and home again.

In a fair transportation system, everyone from individuals to businesses does their part to support transportation investments for all, and low income people do not shoulder the heaviest burden of paying for transit. Supports like subsidized transit and tax credits help to ensure that those who depend most on transportation also benefit from transit expansion. A stable, sustainable transportation system accommodates growth in the GTHA and ensures future generations get fair access to healthy transportation options.

Moving ahead on a healthy transportation system for the region

In regions that have made the greatest strides in advancing transit and active transportation, from Amsterdam and Copenhagen to San Francisco and Vancouver, political leadership has made the difference. That’s why health leaders are encouraging our governments to take immediate action on our prescription for a healthy transportation system in the GTHA.

For more information:

http://www.toronto.ca/health/hphe/built_environment.htm

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Prepared in collaboration with the Registered Nurses’ Association of Ontario