

## BC's Healthy Built Environment Alliance

# Building Collaborations For Healthier BC Communities

PROGRESS REPORT  
MAY 2009

### The built environment and health

The way we plan and build our communities — and the services and resources we offer within them — has an unmistakable impact on public health.

The “ripple effect” is clear: the urban planning policies adopted within regions and municipalities guide such elements as the density mix of neighbourhoods, roadways and transportation infrastructure, and the development of parks, schools and amenities. In turn, this built environment affects individuals’ activities and behaviours on a daily basis – how they get to work or school, their opportunities for exercise, their access to nutritious food, and their exposure to polluted air or water.

On a macro level, entire populations are affected by the built environment that surrounds them. We can see this reflected in levels of social cohesion, physical fitness, chronic disease, obesity and injury.

As BC’s population ages, the drive to prevent chronic disease, enhance health and contain costs to the health system becomes more pressing. Developing urban planning policies and practices that facilitate health and well-being represent an important opportunity for health promotion and illness prevention. We all have a role to play.

**“We can’t look at development, transportation, or health issues in isolation — we share a responsibility together for building communities that support residents’ well being.”**

**Eva Robinson, Manager, BCHLA Partner Initiatives, BC Recreation and Parks Association**

**BC's Healthy Built Environment Alliance –** a voluntary alliance of organizations from a wide variety of sectors across BC – provides leadership and action for healthier, more livable communities.



Photo: Amanda Mitchell

### Time to get moving

*The current direct and indirect costs of physical inactivity to BC’s health care system amount to an estimated \$573 million per year. The inactivity level among BC youth averages 58%, and the rate of overweight Canadian kids has nearly tripled since 1981.*

*The built environment influences physical activity and levels of overweight and obesity. It’s been shown that even modest increases in physical activity can reduce mortality rates.*

## **The purpose of the BC Healthy Built Environment Alliance is to:**

- Bring together the public health professions and the design professions to better understand the health impacts of the built environment.
- Ensure this understanding is transmitted to the design professions, the health professions, the development industry, policy makers at all levels of government, and the public who live in the environments created or regulated by the private and public sectors.
- Support creation of healthier built environments and evaluation of their health, social, environmental and economic impacts.

## **A formative year for the Alliance**

The BC Healthy Built Environment (HBE) Alliance was formed in 2008 to coordinate collaborative efforts for improving population health through policies and practices related to the built environment.

The Alliance brings together for the first time the many different sectors associated with the built

environment and health. These include municipal and provincial government; health organizations; professional associations and non-government organizations; healthy community programs or initiatives; education; researchers; and community champions. Leadership and coordination for the Alliance's activities are provided by BC's Provincial Health Services Authority.

In its first year, the BC Healthy Built Environment Alliance has focused on two major areas: establishing the Alliance, its membership and its activities; and developing resources that member organizations can use to promote HBE issues within their own sectors.

## **Alliance activities 2008–09**

### **Establishing connections**

The Alliance's early work involved identifying and engaging the many individuals and organizations across BC who are committed to tackling healthy built environment issues. A guiding principle is that each member organization has important knowledge and resources to offer, and can benefit from the knowledge and resources of others. Members networked and shared information through meetings over the year, setting priorities and planning activities. They also explored other mechanisms for sharing information, including submitting stories to the BC Healthy Communities provincial newsletter.

### **Building awareness and support**

Developing shared understanding of the importance of a healthy built environment is key to engaging many stakeholders across multiple sectors. The Alliance developed two educational resources to introduce HBE issues to new audiences: "Foundations for a Healthier Built Environment" summary report and PowerPoint presentation (see back page).



*“There’s a real energy created in bringing different sectors together around the issue of healthy built environments – we’re building the relationships we need to move the agenda forward.”*

Cam Brewer, Executive Director, Smart Growth BC

## The air we breathe

Emissions from vehicles, buildings and industry in the built environment all affect air quality and modify the risk for chronic disease. A child's risk for asthma – the most common chronic childhood disease – doubles if he or she lives 75 metres or closer to a major road.

It's estimated that a 10% reduction in airborne fine particulate matter and ozone emissions in the Vancouver area would produce \$195 million in health benefits (from decreases in mortality and emergency room visits, and in occurrences of asthma, bronchitis and cardiac incidents) in 2010.

*“We need policies and evidence on healthy built environments that improve the health of vulnerable populations, increase local food security, increase social cohesion and address the challenges of smaller and suburban communities.”*

Participant, Introduction to Land Use Planning workshop



## Developing specialized training and evaluation tools

The Alliance developed “Introduction to Land Use Planning” training resources to introduce health professionals to planning terms and processes, and highlight opportunities for their professional involvement in land-use planning (see back page). The training resources were piloted and evaluated in Cranbrook in June 2008, leading to seven successful workshops held across BC's regional health authorities in early 2009. Some workshop participants are exploring opportunities to further develop relationships with planners and municipal officials and support them in their work to promote healthy built environments. Plans are underway to build on the successes achieved in these early stages.

## Developing indicators

The Alliance also developed a broad set of indicators – objective ways to measure and track changes in community status and population health. These indicators provide an evidence-based way to evaluate activities undertaken to address HBE issues. Currently in draft form, this list is expected to evolve over time with input from other groups and as further data and indicator development needs are identified.

## BEST PRACTICES IN ACTION

### Wellness Walkways

Vancouver's Mount Pleasant neighbourhood, which features a high demographic of seniors and people with special needs, was redesigned to increase universal access to the visually impaired, those in wheelchairs, and seniors with limited mobility. Streetscapes were retrofitted with curb ramps; extra wide, tinted sidewalks; and rest points at corners and mid-block.

### Sustaining momentum

The impact of the BC Healthy Built Environment Alliance depends on the continued support and involvement of its member organizations to advance the HBE agenda in their own sectors.

Many foundational resources have been developed for building awareness, training health professionals about land use planning, and evaluating HBE activities. Now it's up to Alliance members to work with these resources, refine them, and identify what other materials and support are required to maintain momentum.



Photo: Amanda Mitchell

### Learn more/access resources

To learn more about the BC Healthy Built Environment Alliance and its activities, call 604-675-7400.

Resources developed by the BC Healthy Built Environment Alliance are available at [www.phsa.ca/PopulationHealth](http://www.phsa.ca/PopulationHealth)

The resources include:

- Foundations for a Healthier Built Environment: Summary Document
- Foundations for a Healthier Built Environment: PowerPoint Presentation
- Indicators for a Healthy Built Environment in BC
- Introduction to Land Use Planning for Health Professionals: Workshop Reader
- Introduction to Land Use Planning for Health Professionals: Sample Workshop Agenda
- Introduction to Land Use Planning for Health Professionals: Sample Facilitator's Guide/Agenda

## The BC Healthy Built Environment Alliance

### Membership

- ActNow BC
  - BC Healthy Communities
  - BC Healthy Living Alliance
  - BC Ministry of Community Services
  - BC Ministry of Healthy Living & Sport
  - BC Ministry of Transportation
  - BC Recreation & Parks Association
  - BC Transit
  - First Nations Health Council
  - Fraser Health
  - Heart and Stroke Foundation of BC & Yukon
  - Human Early Learning Partnership
  - Lees & Associates
  - Interior Health
  - Northern Health
  - Planning Institute of BC
  - Provincial Health Services Authority (secretariat):
    - BC Centre for Disease Control
    - Children's & Women's Health Centre of BC
    - Population and Public Health
  - Simon Fraser University
  - Smart Growth BC
  - Union of BC Municipalities
  - University of BC
  - Urban Development Institute – Pacific Region
  - Vancouver Coastal Health
  - Vancouver Island Health Authority
- Chair, *Dr. John Millar, Executive Director,*  
Population Health Surveillance and Disease Control  
Planning, Provincial Health Services Authority