



Complete Streets Workshops Report

November 2009-Rocky Mountain House, Sylvan Lake, Airdrie



With the support of:



Transport Canada



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Rocky Mountain House



Sylvan Lake



City of Airdrie



What is the Sustainable Alberta Association?

Sustainable Alberta Association (SAA) is a Calgary-based, non-profit organization encouraging Canadians to reduce their car use. SAA's goal is to promote sustainable commuting, for better health and a cleaner environment. We have evolved over the years from a grass roots organization to assisting in administering the now national Commuter Challenge. SAA also delivers year-round workplace trip reduction programs, as well as sustainable transportation workshops to workplaces, communities and institutions.

The Transport Canada sponsored workshops were delivered by the Sustainable Alberta Association's Sustainable Transportation Advisor, Rebecca O'Brien, and Executive Director, Kathryn Winkler, as well as Ellen Polegato (assisting with Sylvan Lake) and Kristen Marquardt (assisting with City of Airdrie workshop). A new partnership, established in the late Spring 2009 with the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association (AUMA) enables SAA to connect with municipal staff who are assigned (and enthusiastic) to the assisting SAA with delivering the workshop. The AUMA promotes the Complete Streets workshops through meetings, websites and print material. This significantly reduces the amount of time required by SAA to identify the right contact person /organisation within the host community, and provides a source of discussion and resources for SAA. For further information on AUMA support of SAA's Complete Streets workshops, contact Rachel Bocock, Senior Policy Analyst, AUMA at (780) 409 – 4313 or go to the AUMA .

The workshops are aimed at community leaders: political leaders, municipal staff, health-care professionals, and invited members of the public, especially those who have demonstrated an interest in health, environment and planning issues related to transportation including representatives from youth, senior, and disability sectors. The key to the workshops is to be able to deliver models of similar contexts to the community, so that we draw on positive initiatives taken in northern Canadian and American municipalities.

The purpose of the workshops is to provide decision-makers and citizens with an awareness of what it means to design Complete Streets. SAA workshops provide an overview of sustainable transportation and its economic, social, health and environmental benefits to the community, with a focus on an Albertan regional context. The workshops are designed to promote the improvement of health and environment by engaging communities in a process to evaluate whether their communities are designed for all users, and to improve their walking, cycling, transit and carpooling opportunities

Goals of Workshop

The Rocky Mountain House, Sylvan Lake and City of Airdrie workshops provide residents, community leaders, and municipal staff an opportunity to:

1. Become familiar with the concept of Complete Street Design and its critical importance to public health and environmental well-being
2. Assess the current conditions for sustainable transportation and arrive at a common understanding of its strengths, weaknesses, and priorities
3. Identify specific areas of interest (such as regional transit programs) and look at case studies and steps to put these initiatives into place.
4. Learn best practices for the design of pedestrian, cycling and transit facilities and view examples from other Canadian communities with similar demographic and climate contexts;
5. Provide input on next steps for the improvement of walkability, bikeability and transit options.

Main Components of the Complete Streets workshop:

1. Presentations on Complete Streets and the Alberta context
2. Walkabout and assessments
3. Group Mapping Activity and discussion
4. Urban Transportation Showcase Program (UTSP)
5. Case Study ("Whitehorse Moves" presented by Sabine Schweiger, Environmental Coordinator, City of Whitehorse)
6. Local TDM initiatives
7. Next steps

Complete Streets:

A Complete Street is safe, comfortable, and convenient for travel by automobile, foot, bicycle and transit. Complete Streets should be: designed, built, operated, and maintained taking in consideration the needs of all users (pedestrians, cyclists, transit users, car drivers, the disabled, seniors, and children). When designing and planning Complete Streets, the references for standards should be the more vulnerable street users; a ten year old on a bicycle, a person in a wheelchair, a senior citizen. This way, all people are included. Complete Streets require planners and engineers to design and implement policies with all users in mind. These streets are continuous and need to be part of all planning policy. In other words, one isolated block of Complete Street doesn't help much when it is surrounded by an ocean of incomplete design with no connectivity.

Aspects of complete streets include:

- wide sidewalks with trees;
- green space and parking as a buffer between pedestrians and traffic;
- bikeways that are physically separated from the road system;
- sidewalks that are maintained all throughout the seasons;
- transit stops that are comfortable, safe, convenient and attractive; and
- intersection design that puts priority on the safety of pedestrians and cyclists instead of the speedy flow of cars and trucks; and so on.....

Why does Alberta need to do more in the area of sustainable transportation?

There is no avoiding the signs of construction throughout Alberta, and the fact that the province continues to undergo substantive demographic change. As Alberta's population expands, there will also be more people moving within, and to and from, the cities and towns. How do Alberta regional communities plan to accommodate this movement, without putting even more cars on the streets in their cities and towns? As gas prices continue to be unstable, and citizens choose to consider positive environmental and quality of life options, how will the province accommodate these choices? With safe, convenient and attractive choices aside from the automobile-Complete Streets- it may be possible to have one of the most liveable provinces in the country.

Over the past half century, streets in North America have been built to accommodate the 60% of the population that drives. Cities and towns in Alberta are prime examples of this, with the highest per capita vehicle ownership, the highest gas consumption and the most kilometres driven per car in the country (Source, Alberta Transportation). Regardless of the excellent trails systems in many communities, the reality is that the current built environment too often discourages healthy, sustainable transportation. With a few exceptions, engineers have been making incomplete streets for far too long, and they have done this because North Americans see it as a fundamental right to drive anywhere, anytime. The tide is changing, as many now recognise the negative impacts of this poorly built environment,

from obesity, to pollution, to the costs of the car-both personal and social. In steadily increasing number of US States and municipalities, Complete Streets are now policy (see California Complete Streets Law). As Colin Farynowski (Chief Engineer Transportation), City of Grande Prairie) said during his presentation the Peace River workshop in 2008: “We need to recognise that the cost of building for the car is too high, and look at alternatives that will benefit the community. As pressures for fast development increase, do not make the same mistakes in considering only the car for transportation.”

Interestingly, the evaluations from the Complete Streets workshops ask the question “How interested are you/ your organisation in taking action on improving sustainable transportation in your community?”, on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 is the highest) , 95% of respondents circle 5.

Rocky Mountain House backgrounder:

Rocky Mountain House, with a population of about 7000, is located about an hour and 15 minutes drive west of Red Deer. It is located at the confluence of the Clearwater and North Saskatchewan Rivers, and (as was made very clear by the workshop participants) takes pride in the stunning background of mountains, lakes and rivers. Oil gas, tourism and agriculture are important economic sectors.

Similar to Peace River, Rocky is an engaged and progressive community (see photos), with an advanced trail system throughout the town. The participants at the workshop were very proud of the recreational trails system. There was a distinct interest in:

- Expanding the trail system to more of a transportation corridor;
- Looking at a pilot transit program; and
- The possibility of building a roundabout that could improve the highway crossing , which is cutting the community in half, and making access to services a challenge for pedestrians and cyclists.

Like many towns in Alberta, the challenges of a provincial highway system that does not take anything but motor vehicles into account, creates a real barrier to moving forward on connectivity.

Although we did not get the opportunity to do a walkabout in the downtown, Rocky Mountain House’s town centre is compact and walkable, with services such as restaurants, retail stores and museums.

Schools, a hospital as well as a satellite Red Deer College campus, recreational facilities (such as a seasonal outdoor ice rink) and businesses are within a three kilometre radius from residential areas, which lends a strong potential for walking and cycling. A new highschool has been strategically built in the centre of Rocky Mountain House adjacent to a walking/cycling path. In the Complete Streets Calculator, participants noted that sidewalks had improved greatly over the past three decades, but that connectivity was sometimes poor, and sidewalks were often unpredictable in that they were suddenly discontinued, or there was inadequate snow removal, etc. Wheelchair access was identified as a problem in some areas. For example, the garbage bin at the new Subway blocked any wheelchair access to the business. Business owners identified the freeze- thaw cycle as making winter sidewalk maintenance a challenge. Bike infrastructure was also identified by participants as poor and in need of expansion. There was a discussion about the revenues that could be brought in by investing in cycling tourism.

Sylvan Lake Backgrounder:

The Town of Sylvan Lake has a population of about 11, 000. It was named the “ Fastest Growing Rural Community in Canada between 5000-10000 populations” (Sylvan Lake has doubled in population in the last 10 years.) It is a popular tourist destination, and has been so historically (lakes are far and few between in Alberta, so the town was a popular tourist destination from the 1930’s onwards). Sylvan Lake now has a substantial year -round population.

The town is moving on clear path towards sustainability. The fact that it is an attractive area, with an economy based on maintaining that element, is reflected in the attitudes and infrastructure. Of all the towns where workshops have been delivered in the province, Sylvan Lake appears to be working most steadily towards a sustainability model, and complete street design is on the radar. The town has already had several design charettes, and recently a major budget had been put aside for sustainable transportation, including a transit system. The mayor, Susan Sampson, is an avid cyclist, and town staff are progressive and energetic. Sylvan Lake is a community that will provide a model throughout Alberta.

Airdrie Backgrounder:

The City of Airdrie is one of the fastest growing communities in Canada with 38,091 people located 10 minutes north of Calgary. The local economy is primarily local and regional retail, construction, manufacturing and professional services. It is categorised as a satellite community to Calgary, with 50% of the population commuting to Calgary. There is a strong bedroom- community element to the municipality; however it is proud of its pathways system, is moving towards a strong transit system and has endorsed the Natural Step program. The challenge in moving forward that was identified at the workshop was weak citizen engagement. City staff is in the process of bringing a series of local speakers to present to the public on sustainability.

Workshop Activities

1. The workshop starts with a general introduction.

2. Presentation:

There are two presentations delivered by SAA; one that looks at why steps need to be taken in Alberta to improve sustainable transportation infrastructure and promotion; and another that looks at Complete Street design examples that are relevant and context-sensitive.

3. Walkabout:

Participants were given one of four icons for Complete Street design: a ten year old on a bicycle, a person in a wheelchair, a senior citizen, or a driver. Stefan Felsing, a planner with the Town of Peace River, also brought a stroller so that participants could take turns pushing it along the sidewalk. During the walkabout participants were asked to look at the transportation infrastructure and ask themselves how those residents are expected to access the services in the neighbourhood by foot, bike or transit.

Participants were given a “Complete Streets Calculator” asked to assess the current barriers (speeding cars and traffic congestion, unsafe, unpleasant -and sometimes just aesthetically unappealing conditions) and potential for improvement. Furthermore, they were able to consider the loss of dignity a wheelchair user or senior citizen must suffer just to find a safe place to access the sidewalk or cross the road.

4. Mapping:

After the walkabout, participants return to the facility and engage in a mapping exercise. Using an idea that the SAA team picked up at a charrette training workshop, SAA now draws maps of the walkabout area surrounding the facility, and then has the maps enlarged so they cover the space of a table in order to allow a group to work together on them. This can be a considerable challenge, as we have to base the maps on satellite images (retrieved through google) and then use those to make detailed maps with sidewalks, buildings, etc. To have this done professionally is very expensive, and with a reduced budget SAA has found that we can produce them in house, though it can often be a full day’s work. We have found that the participants respond best to this activity when the maps correspond to the walkabout area.

Participants are given a toolbox of sustainable transportation ideas (drawn from the Complete Streets presentation and WalkableCommunities.org resources) and asked to use the toolbox as they drew their own ideas for improvements on the maps. This generates a lot of discussion, and is a fun, hands on exercise for the participants. It allows the stakeholders to use their imaginations and step out of their comfort zones. It allows participants in the group to bounce ideas back and forth from an engineering, planning, and health perspective.

5. Case Study, Whitehorse Moves

The City of Whitehorse's UTSP "Whitehorse Moves", is presented by Sabine Schweiger. A number of participants identify the case study as the highlight of the day, as it provides the participants with a model of what steps Northern Canadian Communities are taking to address sustainable transportation, and subsequently what is possible for these communities.

SAA presents ideas on Next Steps. These include:

- Using municipal sustainability planning processes and policy to identify goals (healthier population, sustainable environment)
- Identifying challenges, as well as areas where the municipality can start small
- Looking to communities with similar barriers, how these were overcome, lessons learned (such as the community of Cochrane, which has recently partnered with the province on a roundabout, on highway 22, something that Rocky would like to improve the walking and cycling connection over highway 11)
- Connecting all stakeholders, devise a plan in collaboration with professionals and public through the charrette process
- Applying for municipal, provincial and federal funding that supports Active transportation and transit

General observations on the November workshop series:

These were three substantially different communities. Rocky Mountain House is a solid, rurally based community, Sylvan Lake is a highly progressive town, while Airdrie is a community on the cusp between being a town and a city and in the process of shaping itself. The two latter communities have some of the fastest growing, youngest populations in the country, so decisions for the future need to be put into place now. Each community struggles with the challenges created by a provincial transportation system that is quite oblivious to the interests of Complete Streets. Each community has excellent leadership and municipal staff. More public participation at the workshops would have been beneficial, and that is something that SAA would like to work on for the next series of workshops.

Three workshops in one month, though tiring, is reasonable now that the AUMA is assisting with the initial contact process. The reality was that for the first time, SAA was inundated with requests for workshops, so much so that we had to turn down three communities! The amount of time spent previous to this partnership with the AUMA on finding the right contact to work with was substantial (a process that can take months if there is staff turnover, such as the case in Fort McMurray last March).

Transport Canada certainly got value for its funding with the workshops. SAA will not be able to deliver them again at the standards which are essential to the success of the workshops, within the funding constraints that were available for the November series. After facilitator assistants (for the day of), transportation, printing, and honorariums (to Sabine from Whitehorse) were paid, the salary for SAA was about \$10 an hour which is unsustainable. Given the value of the workshops to the communities that participate, and the interest of the federal government in terms of health and environment, this will hopefully be improved as TC is also provided with more funding for these initiatives. Likewise, the fact that the host communities are more than willing to provide in-kind contributions that cover catering, facilities,

communications, printing, staff time, etc, SAA is looking towards a fee- for- service model that would require minimal dependence on federal funding. This is already under negotiation with some communities.

Further to this, it should be noted that it was SAA that chose to deliver three workshops, and that TC would have been satisfied with two; also that TC was very supportive in assisting with these November workshops. The fact that there continue to be an overwhelming number of requests from communities both in Alberta and now outside the province (recently, Winnipeg and Toronto) made it hard for SAA to provide less than three workshops.

Acknowledgements:

SAA would like to thank Transport Canada, the AUMA, Town of Rocky Mountain House, Sylvan Lake, and City of Airdrie and the City of Whitehorse for supporting this workshop. SAA would like to thank the participants at the workshops for their enthusiasm and energy.

Some feedback:

“On behalf of all the participants that attended the recent Complete Streets Workshop in Sylvan Lake, Thank You! The information presented and the community walk about proved to be very beneficial when planning sustainable communities. In Sylvan Lake we are increasing our citizen's environmental awareness, which is most important as we reside on the shoreline of the most popular recreational lake in Alberta. As politicians and planners we also strive to provide the infrastructure to promote a walkable community. Complete Streets highlighted the significant benefit of dedicated bicycle lanes which we do not have in Sylvan. The working example from Whitehorse reinforced the success of bicycle lanes in a much colder climate than ours! We are now armed with great ideas and look forward to seeing some changes with Complete Streets in Sylvan Lake.”

-Mayor Susan Samson

Town of Sylvan Lake:

“Yesterday was wonderful, I have had three Councillors and the Mayor comment on what an awesome day as well as the Town Manager and fellow staff members. What we need to do next is keep talking the talk so we can create the walk!!!!!!

Elly Martin

Director of Planning & Development

Town of Rocky Mountain House

For more information on Complete Streets, go to www.completestreets.org or www.walkablecommunities.org. There are also some great examples on the Street Films website at www.streetfilms.org/archives/physically-separated-bike-lanes.

For a case study that is relevant to a northern Canadian community, go to Transport Canada's UTSP's "Whitehorse Moves" at www.tc.gc.ca/programs/environment/UTSP.

For further information on Sustainable Alberta Association, go to www.calgarycommute.ca.

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