

## REAL ESTATE MATTERS

# Walkable neighbourhoods high on Metro's wish list

**UBC survey:** Many residents would give up larger homes to live in pedestrian-friendly areas

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**Y**our local environment has a big impact on your health. Metro Vancouver residents understand that and they want to live in healthier neighbourhoods. That's the conclusion of a UBC study released earlier this week.

Planners have been talking for more than a decade about how neighbourhood design is linked to the behaviour of residents, their personal fitness and ultimately their health outcomes. They've worked hard to connect the dots between walkable neighbourhoods and healthier residents. People now seem to be getting it.

This local study not only confirms this, but it also provides evidence that consumers in our own region prefer to live in walkable neighbourhoods. The study found that nearly two-thirds of urban residents and 40 per cent of suburban residents in Metro Vancouver have a strong desire to live in a walkable neighbourhood, where they are able to walk to shops, food stores and restaurants. Less than 10 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively, have a strong desire to live in an auto-oriented neighbourhood, where they require a vehicle trip to access these everyday amenities.

Moreover, people are willing to make trade-offs to live in walkable neighbourhoods, like giving up larger lots and bigger homes. Of the Vancouver residents who participated in the survey, 52 per cent indicated they would strongly prefer living in a neighbourhood with closely spaced houses on smaller lots if it meant they



A UBC study suggests that nearly two-thirds of urban residents in Metro Vancouver have a strong desire to live in a walkable neighbourhood. Shown here is a streetscape in UBC's pedestrian-friendly community in Burnaby.

were within five kilometres of work, school and other important destinations.

Interestingly, about two-thirds of Vancouver survey participants felt their neighbourhood is already very walkable.

Walkability is largely a function of proximity and connectivity between places or how easily people can travel directly between their home, job and other important destinations.

One particular study finding really jumped out at me. It pointed to evidence that people who prefer and live in a walkable place report healthier lifestyles than those who prefer to, but don't live in a walkable place. One measure was the

incidence of high blood pressure among the survey participants. People who prefer and live in a walkable neighbourhood reported significantly lower incidence of high blood pressure at 10 per cent, while those who would prefer to live in a walkable neighbourhood, but don't, reported more than double the incidence of high blood pressure at 21 per cent.

These figures were adjusted for demographic and income factors. These numbers seem to indicate that those of us who live in places where we have no choice but to drive know that our neighbourhoods are not good for our health.

UBC's Dr. Larry Frank was the

lead researcher on this study, which surveyed 1,223 Metro Vancouver residents, asking them to choose between two scenarios — one more walkable and one more auto-oriented — in a series of illustrated neighbourhood trade-offs that defined their preferences.

Frank, a planner in sustainable transportation who is associated with both UBC's School of Community and Regional Planning and UBC's School of Population and Public Health, is recognized as a global expert on the integration of urban design, transportation and public health. Thanks to the support of B.C.'s Real Estate Foundation, he was able to dive

beyond theories and tap into the preferences and opinions of "ordinary people" who live in our metropolitan region.

This study of residential preferences that integrates health outcomes and looks at these trade-offs between walkability or reliance on the automobile and other factors such as housing costs, job access, lot or housing size, etc., is the first of its kind in Canada. It will help not only planners and public health professionals, but also homebuilders who have already begun to respond to the demand for new housing close to transit. It should also strengthen the argument that Metro mayors are making as

they begin to prepare voters for the upcoming referendum on regional transit plans and sustainable funding.

The survey concludes there is unmet demand for more walkable neighbourhoods among those who live in very auto-oriented neighbourhoods in Metro Vancouver. Some 30 per cent of survey participants who live in more auto-oriented neighbourhoods in Vancouver would like to live in a neighbourhood within walking distance of a variety of shopping. In other areas of Metro Vancouver, 25 per cent of those who live in auto-oriented neighbourhoods would like to live in those same walkable neighbourhoods.

These findings align with Metro Vancouver's regional growth strategy, which includes creating more compact urban areas and supporting growth that is concentrated near frequent transit service. These regional goals are high-level, aspirational goals.

Perhaps the next piece of research that should be conducted is a survey that quantifies the actual amount of appropriately zoned land in these growth concentration areas where housing can be developed at densities sufficient to make neighbourhoods truly walkable.

Use the following link to access the study's full report: [http://health-design.sph.ubc.ca/files/2014/09/Final-Report-Residential-Preferences-and-Public-Health-in-Metro-Vancouver\\_-09262014.pdf](http://health-design.sph.ubc.ca/files/2014/09/Final-Report-Residential-Preferences-and-Public-Health-in-Metro-Vancouver_-09262014.pdf)

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