

## **MEDIA COVERAGE**

*The Cost of Physical Inactivity in Halifax Regional Municipality*

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**Monday, July 12, 2004**

**Halifax Daily News**

#### **Suburban downside**

By Shaune MacKinlay

When Cathy Whitman needs a litre of milk she faces a nine kilometre return trip to the store from her picturesque Kingswood subdivision home in Hammonds Plains.

The Whitmans left their downtown Halifax home more than five years ago for Florida and then, in 2001, for life in Kingswood, which Cathy jokingly calls Pleasantville.

“Square footage is more important to me than the location,” Cathy says.

Her children, six-year-old Kirk and three-year-old Morgan, have a huge landscaped yard, a cul-de-sac for bike riding, clean air, a 2,700-square-foot home, and neighbours with swimming pools. They do not, however, have city water and sewer, sidewalks, or a playground nearby.

With its long roads, big lots, and distance to other centres, Kingswood is a textbook example of urban sprawl. Geographically, it’s about the size of peninsular Halifax, and yet it has only 1,100 homes.

Halifax Regional Municipality planning staff are loath to point the finger at any one group of city taxpayers, but Kingswood, and the other high-end subdivisions, that proliferated in the absence of adequate schools, traffic lights, and city services are frequently cited as examples of development run amok.

And let’s not forget the driving. Oh, the driving. The Whitmans, who both work from home, still need a minivan and a car to get everything done in the run of a day.

“One day I knew I had to do a lot of things; we had to go to gymnastics in Sackville, something in Bedford, I had to come back out to get Kirk at the school bus at three to go to swimming lessons in Clayton Park and then back again,” she said. “I drove 107 kilometres that day, just within HRM.”

With so many cars and so many homes, speeding is a problem on Kingswood’s long roads. Since the time he first moved to Kingswood from downtown Montreal seven years ago with his wife Jane, Dan Bell figures traffic on Hammonds Plains Road has doubled.

If forced to choose, though, Dan Bell — and the Whitmans — would pick country-in-the-city Kingswood over their old downtown lives.

“We like the street we live on; it’s a very friendly street; the neighbours are great,” Bell says.

Both the Bells and the Whitmans live in the part of Kingswood that still relies on a well, although the city has piped water to most of the homes.

Add those dollars to the cost of other services — such as winter plowing and garbage pick-up — and it’s not hard to see why the municipality worries about the sustainability of unfettered development in metro’s outlying areas.

In low density suburbs, with about 16 people per acre, HRM pays an estimated \$1,155 per person annually for everything from water and sewer, to roads, transit, parks, police, and fire service. In a low density urban

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neighbourhood, with 22 people per acre, the cost drops to \$1,029. In a high density urban area, with a combination of single homes and apartments, the cost dips to \$884 per person.

One of the criticisms often levelled at places like Kingswood is that the homes set back from the road on big lots are anti-community. For the Whitmans, who know everyone on their street, that hasn't proven true.

Nova Scotia Homebuilders' Association CEO Paul Pettipas understands the city's sustainability problem, still he doubts there will ever come a time when people don't want what rural subdivisions have to offer.

"Let people decide where they want to live, but make sure they pay for their decision," he said.

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**Thursday, September 16, 2004**

**Halifax Daily News**

#### **Urban Planners Should Encourage Fitness, Urges Heart and Stroke Report**

By Beth Johnston-Ross

Urban sprawl could be causing some sprawling Haligonian waistlines.

Because so many of us spend hours in our cars commuting to and from work, then drive to run errands, we are missing the opportunity to get moving, a Heart and Stroke Foundation report released yesterday says.

Urban planning can boost residents' fitness levels by providing them with walking or cycling alternatives to driving and accessible sports and recreation facilities, saving public money on health-care costs, the GPI Atlantic report concludes.

"Halifax's 25-year planning process is a great opportunity to highlight the need to build communities with health in mind," said Clare O'Connor, the Heart and Stroke Foundation's director of policy and government relations. "(The city) is headed in the right direction and realizes there is a connection between planning and physical activity, and this report tries to drive that home."

Even a 10 per cent improvement in Haligonians' level of activity would yield a savings to the province of \$4.75 million, the report said.

"Our communities need to support activity at the recreational level, but to have the biggest impact, we need to ensure that (there are) biking and walking options for everyday mobility," O'Connor said. "Walking or biking to work, grocery stores, dry cleaners are all ways of incorporating physical activity into our daily schedules."

For two years, researchers tracked the travel patterns of 10,500 residents of Atlanta, Ga., recording BMI (body mass index), minutes spent in a car and kilometres walked. (The body mass index is a measure of body fat based on height and weight.)

The study found people who live in high-density neighbourhoods tend to walk to the shops and services they need. This daily exercise pattern shows up in their smaller waistlines. People who lived in pedestrian-friendly neighbourhoods lowered their risk of obesity by 35 per cent. Having a bus stop close to your house means you're more likely to walk to it, the report said.

In 2001, 8.3 per cent of Nova Scotians walked to work, and 0.6 per cent took their bike, according to Statistics Canada Census data. Improved sidewalks and cycle paths could improve these numbers, the report said.

The report brings a useful perspective to regional planning, which is trying to make the city's communities "walkable," said Carol Macomber, the head of regional planning.

"It makes a big difference if you are able to walk to do your errands, and a lot of people really enjoy being able to do that and not having to drive everywhere," Macomber said. "There's a lot we can do to work toward a more proactive approach to health care."

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**Monday, September 20, 2004**

**Halifax Herald**

#### **Report: city spaces should inspire activity**

By Jeffrey Simpson / Staff Reporter

Urban planners can affect the physical and financial health of communities, says a report released Wednesday.

The Heart and Stroke Foundation of Nova Scotia says physical inactivity in Halifax Regional Municipality results in greater rates of illness and costs taxpayers \$68 million a year in health-care spending and lost productivity.

Clare O'Connor, the foundation's director of policy and government relations, said residents would be better off if urban spaces were designed to make it easier for them to incorporate physical activity in their daily routines. That could include walking or biking to places such as work or the grocery store.

"In Nova Scotia, we have significantly high rates of chronic disease and we need to be looking at ways to ensure that we're rectifying that situation as much as possible because we know that a significant amount of chronic disease is preventable," Ms. O'Connor said.

"People lead busy lives and going home after work and going and doing some level of physical exercise isn't always the easiest option. So how can we fix that during the day?"

Physical activity provides health benefits that include protecting against heart disease, stroke, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, obesity and depression. The report indicates that in HRM, 30 per cent of heart disease and 16 per cent of stroke, hypertension, and type 2 diabetes are the result of physical inactivity.

The study, conducted for the foundation by GPI Atlantic, says 48 per cent of HRM residents are inactive.

If 10 per cent of the population became more active, it would save the lives of some of the 200 people who die prematurely every year in the municipality from diseases linked to physical inactivity and result in a savings of \$4.75 million.

Ms. O'Connor said of the \$68 million spent in the municipality each year due to inactivity, about \$23 million goes directly to pay for health care.

"If we are going to build communities that do not encourage physical activity, then this is what it's going to cost us," she said.

"There's a significant connection between regional planning and health, and the city planning staff is heading in the right direction. But we wanted to say to them, 'Here's some more information that we think can contribute to this overall process.'"

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**Saturday October 2, 2004**

**Halifax Daily News**

#### **Let's be more bike friendly**

By Bretton Loney

David Zitner's bike rests by the door inside his modest office at Dalhousie University, his helmet dangling from the handlebars.

Hours before, the 60-year-old medical faculty member took 20 minutes to bike in from his home on Purcells Cove Road to start his day, something he does as often as he can.

But it wasn't easy, given that his route requires biking up Quinpool Road, a street as welcoming to bikers as an alligator-filled Florida swamp.

That's why Zitner has joined with nine other physicians to form a group called ADAPT. Its goal is to encourage HRM and the province to develop infrastructure which supports active lifestyles.

"If you set up an environment that encourages people to be active, to be physically fit, to do things that are enjoyable, that take energy, people will do it," says Zitner.

"If you set up barriers, if you think when you're biking up Quinpool Road that you're taking your life in your hands ... people are less likely to do it."

And we all know our population needs the exercise.

"Basically, we have an unhealthy population in Canada and, depending on who you read, about half the people are overweight and unfit," says Zitner, the director of medical informatics at Dal's faculty of medicine.

That unhealthy population comes at a cost and a recent study, sponsored by the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Nova Scotia, gave it a pricetag.

The study estimated that physical inactivity in HRM costs taxpayers \$68 million per year in healthcare spending and lost productivity.

Foundation spokeswoman Clare O'Connor says it would be better if communities were designed to make it easier for residents to incorporate physical activity — biking or walking to work, school or the corner store — into their daily routines.

"People lead busy lives and going home after work and going and doing some level of physical exercise isn't always the easiest option," says O'Connor.

Zitner agrees.

"I know lots of people who bike recreationally on the weekends who say to me that they would use biking as transportation if they didn't feel they were taking their life in their hands."

The problem is a lack of infrastructure such as bike paths and bike lanes that would make commuting safer, says Zitner, adding it's not something citizens can build for themselves.

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Zitner, who doesn't profess to be a transportation expert, says he has no idea what such infrastructure would cost, but does have a sense of the cost of other expenditures.

He notes the provincial government recently announced enhancements to its prescription monitoring program that will cost millions.

“My impression is that millions of dollars worth of bike paths, bike trails and healthy living would do substantially more good.”

He notes \$40 million is spent annually in Nova Scotia on anti-depressants despite studies which suggest they're not all that effective. In comparison, Zitner says studies suggest that exercise can be effective in promoting a sense of well-being.

“It may be that the amount we're spending on anti-depressants ... could be better spent on things that we know for sure improve your health without having side effects ... like bike paths.”

As a noted physician once said: “If you could bottle everything you get from physical activity and sell it in a pharmacy, it would go for a hefty price.”

So we know physical inactivity comes at a price and we know that a lack of infrastructure discourages more physically-active forms of commuting. So how do we get from the present to the future?

We lobby our municipal candidates — especially our mayoral candidates — to take action and actually deliver bike infrastructure.

We work to ensure HRM's new regional plan supports cycling and walking by making them viable alternatives to motorized transportation.

“If we're serious about promoting healthy activities, it seems like a no-brainer,” says Zitner.

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**Wednesday, October 6, 2004**

**Halifax Herald**

#### **Inactivity is a burden on society and our cities should be tailored towards hoofing it or biking it**

By Dr. Lydia Makrides

Physical inactivity is taking a terrible toll on the health of our city, our province our country - and our economy. This toll is spelled out clearly in a new report prepared by GPI Atlantic for the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Nova Scotia, *The Cost of Physical Inactivity in the Halifax Regional Municipality*.

Nearly half of Halifax's population over the age of 12 is inactive, and this costs Nova Scotia \$68 million a year in direct and indirect costs. It is also the cause of 200 premature deaths a year.

This is not inevitable. We can make a start by exploring ways to encourage - and enable - us to get more physically active: in our leisure, in our commutes, and in our workplaces.

The shape and structure of our cities can promote active commuting: walking and bicycling to work, using public transportation combined with walking to and from the bus or ferry stop. Bicycle paths and pedestrian trails can make walking and cycling simpler and safer. Improved access to sports facilities and outdoor activities will entice Haligonians off their couches into more active lifestyles.

We can make Halifax a more walkable city: providing services locally so people can walk to get them, encouraging walkable neighbourhoods so people don't have to jump in their cars for every errand.

A recent study conducted in Atlanta, Ga. found that walkability and connectedness of neighbourhoods are strongly associated with a decrease in the risk of obesity, while increased time spent in a car is associated with an increased risk of obesity: People who lived in walkable neighbourhoods lowered their risk of obesity by 35 per cent.

Each additional kilometre walked per day was associated with a 4.8 per cent reduction in the likelihood of obesity. Each additional hour spent in a car per day was associated with a six per cent increase in the likelihood of obesity.

The potential payoff for this reordering of our priorities is huge as detailed in the Heart and Stroke Foundation's report:

Physical inactivity in HRM costs the provincial health care system \$16 million a year in hospital, physician and drug costs alone. When all direct health care costs are added, including private expenditures, the sedentary lifestyle of nearly half of HRM residents costs the province, and, therefore, the taxpayer, \$23.6 million a year in direct medical care expenditures.

This spending is currently added to the provincial Gross Domestic Product and economic growth statistics, and is thus taken as a sign of prosperity and progress. The Genuine Progress Index counts this spending due to physical inactivity as a cost - not a gain - to the economy. Physical inactivity in HRM costs the provincial economy an additional \$ 44.7 million each year in indirect productivity losses due to premature death and disability. Adding direct and indirect costs, the total economic burden of physical inactivity amounts to \$180 per person per year in Halifax Regional Municipality.

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In the Halifax Regional Municipality, 30 per cent of heart disease, 22 per cent of osteoporosis, 16 per cent of stroke, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, and colon cancer, and 9 per cent of breast cancer is attributable to physical inactivity.

Studies show that regular exercisers have much less overall lifetime morbidity than those who are sedentary, indicating that avoided medical costs due to physical activity are not simply deferred to older ages.

Two hundred HRM residents die prematurely each year due to physical inactivity, accounting for seven per cent of all premature deaths in the municipality. These premature deaths result in the loss of 850 potential years of life every year in HRM before age 70. In other words, if all HRM residents were physically active, the municipality would gain 850 productive years of life each year, with corresponding gains to the economy.

A 10 per cent improvement in Haligonians' level of activity would save the province \$4.75 million.

The good news is that Nova Scotians are getting more active. In 2001, 53 per cent of Nova Scotians were inactive. In 2003, 50 per cent were inactive. We are improving - and individuals, communities and workplaces are benefiting. The 25-year regional plan for HRM is an opportunity to ensure that we continue to improve. Let's use it.

Dr. Lydia Makrides is president, Creative Wellness Solutions and director of the Atlantic Health and Wellness Institute.

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**Tuesday, October 19, 2004**

**Halifax Herald**

#### **What kind of healthy economy do we want?**

By David Aalders – Ecology Action Centre

TWO SEEMINGLY unrelated topics have been in the news lately: a) Nova Scotia's unacceptably high rates of physical inactivity, as outlined in a recent study by the Heart and Stroke Foundation; and b) demands by Canadian municipalities for a portion of federal fuel taxes, allowing them to fix decaying urban infrastructure, especially transportation. The Heart and Stroke Foundation study, which stressed the linkages between physical inactivity and the design of our communities, found that 50 per cent of Nova Scotians and 48 per cent of Halifax Regional Municipality residents are inactive.

We often think the easiest way to become more active is to join a gym. We fail to realize that daily trips on foot (or bike) to grocery, department and hardware stores in our own neighbourhoods could be opportunities to stay in shape.

Increasingly, however, retail developments have been permitted on the city fringe, often without adequate transportation planning. An example of this has been the development of the Bayers Lake Business Park primarily as a big-box retail centre. Such poor urban planning forces more people to drive to the shops, increases road congestion, and further degrades our air quality. Shoppers have less opportunity for exercise as they spend more time behind the wheel. Taxpayers, meanwhile, have had to foot the infrastructure bill and to extend transit services so that residents without vehicles have at least some opportunity, however inconvenient, to access these retail services.

Often left behind are abandoned storefronts and virtual ghost towns where once stood thriving malls and street-scapes. As shoppers leave their communities to buy necessities no longer available locally, or available only at older, dilapidated stores, scarce dollars are siphoned off to big-box centres instead. Those without access to a car, the disabled, seniors and youth, have to make do with the handful of shops that remain.

Bayers Lake Business Park is just one example of the implications of poor city planning for the quality of life in our neighbourhoods and for our physical and environmental health. More and more national chains are gradually pulling their investments out of existing communities to be where other chains have invested - in shopping malls at the fringe of the community. This scenario is being played out across the province, in towns like Amherst and Truro, with devastating consequences for local shopping districts and the physical health of our communities.

Nova Scotia is facing a challenge on several fronts. Our population is aging. We need to increase our levels of activity to reduce demands on our already strained health care system. To make the situation even more challenging, our cities and towns are faced with growing infrastructure demands as existing stock continues to deteriorate. We must also reduce carbon dioxide emissions as part of Canada's commitment to the Kyoto accord.

Given these challenges, municipalities and the province need to take a more active role in how our communities are designed. They must encourage vibrant neighbourhoods where residents can satisfy many of their daily needs within a few minutes' walk of their home or workplace or a short bus ride away. As cities grow, more and more of these community centres could be developed, all interconnected by bikeways and transit.

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If this means removing the right of property owners to build commercial projects away from existing communities, then so be it. The question is not whether we want a vibrant economy - it's what kind of healthy economy do we want? The collective bottom lines of many active neighbourhoods can exceed the economies of so-called big-box power centres.

Plans to redevelop the "Wheby" quarry off Highway 118 in Dartmouth for commercial and retail tenants were recently announced. This project must not become another Bayers Lake. If this happens, then all the efforts and taxpayer money spent to create a new regional plan for HRM might well be wasted. The abandoned stores that we have seen in Halifax will be repeated in Dartmouth as shops move away from existing malls. This is hardly the smart thinking that taxpayers demand from councillors and MLAs.

It has been observed that Nova Scotia is one of the last places in North America to pick up on trends. Many other jurisdictions across the continent have embraced the concept of "Smart Growth," in which new developments are encouraged or channelled into areas with existing services such as transit, roads and schools. National chains like Wal-Mart and Home Depot are finally catching on, and have begun to build stores like the new Home Depot in downtown Toronto. These offer the same products and price, but in a store that is accessible to pedestrians and transit riders, not just to people driving cars.

Given the fiscal and demographic challenges this province is facing, we must demand SMARTER thinking from our politicians and bureaucrats.

David Aalders is chair of the urban issues committee at the Ecology Action Centre. He has also been active for several years in the revitalization of Herring Cove Road as the "Main Street" of Spryfield.