

A Dozen Good Reasons For Developing An Active Transportation Plan

A community can harvest significant benefits from the process of developing an active transportation (“AT”) plan. These benefits are separate and distinct from the implementation phases that later help the community become walk and bike friendly.

The dozen reasons which follow are loosely grouped yet in no specific order, although some follow as the natural result of others. The opportunity to gain these benefits also hinges upon the experience and expertise brought to the process through a tendered consulting contract. If a municipality is at the beginning of developing an AT plan, it will not have the capabilities in-house.

Here are “a dozen good reasons”:

1. Educating Stakeholders

The planning process invites all stakeholders to participate in workshops and reviews, providing an opportunity for education through exposure to best practices, research, and case studies. Those stakeholders include residents, city councillors and staff, public health representatives, and business interests. Participants gain a common understanding of active transportation benefits in health, safety, social equity, and economic competitiveness. This shared understanding helps create consensus in discussions around various elements of the plan.

2. Dispelling Common Myths

The evidence-based approach used in the facilitated workshops and reviews quickly debunks many myths related to active transportation. These are myths that get disproportionate coverage in the media, including “road too busy or dangerous”, “nobody bikes/walks”, “hurt property values”, “fire trucks won’t get through”, and more. These objections are dispelled by the practices underpinning current design approaches, and case examples from Ontario’s 42 “Bike Friendly Communities” that are home to 2/3 of Ontarians.

3. Facilitating Public Engagement

The consultants leading the process are skilled and experienced in engaging different stakeholder groups and facilitating the workshops. Unlike typical public information sessions, workshops include a full spectrum of participants, resulting in a broad discussion of concerns, suggestions, needs and hopes. Multiple workshops provide opportunities to address different elements of an AT plan such as community trails, pedestrian crossings, intersection designs, and cycling network routes. Having the experts handle the tough job of planning and running the workshops is especially helpful in towns without those skills on staff.

4. Forging Community Cohesion

The education and engagement process results in broad community understanding and support of the active transportation plan. Participants gain a common vision for active transportation’s contribution to a healthier, more prosperous community. Participation

also generates ownership of the plan amongst those engaged.

5. Seeding “Encouragement” Programs

The workshops provide an opportunity to draw out ideas for low-cost/high-impact programs that begin to encourage more people to get out and walk or ride more often. The consulting team is well versed in programs from other communities and leads the discussions. Encouragement programs help to normalize new behaviour, starting with simple things like “slow rides” that grow to include “bike to work” and “bike to shop”. With a shared vision of a healthier community, these programs seed the journey of social change.

6. Adopting and Adapting Demonstrated Best Practices

The structured process of developing a plan is led by experienced consultants who know the field inside out. They bring the lessons learned, best practices, and successes from other municipalities. Every community has a strong cadre of “armchair experts” with opinions to share on something they saw once somewhere that would “obviously be easy to do” or “good enough”. The facilitated process of workshops and reviews, coupled with education, helps participants understand the pros and cons of design options, and the range of viable alternatives for each situation.

7. Integrating Current and Anticipated Key Destinations into the Plan

Workshop participants help identify existing walking/cycling destinations, known and anticipated developments such as hospital expansions, arenas, school sites, housing developments, and commercial/retail centres. These can all be integrated into the plan. As new developments go through planning reviews, walking and cycling accessibility is predetermined and integrated, rather than debated as an afterthought.

8. Developing a Costed and Staged Implementation Plan

City staff and other stakeholders participate in creating a costed and staged implementation plan. Such a plan can fit the city’s capital budget, optimize development of a connected/contiguous AT network, and integrate with the city’s longer-term capital plan for road renovations and other anticipated developments.

9. Updating Policies and Bylaws

Many municipalities starting the development of an AT plan will have a piecemeal evolution of zoning and traffic/parking bylaws and other policies. The consultants bring the best policy and bylaw practices from the many Ontario communities who’ve gone before, tapping that knowledge to provide a draft set of recommended updates for consideration. This is important in providing residents and visitors with a consistent set of expectations that align across municipalities. It’s also important from the perspective of potential municipal liability that might otherwise arise.

10. Improving City Productivity

All stakeholders own the AT plan through their participation in its development. After the plan has been approved by council, including its staged and budgeted implementation

schedule, rollout can proceed without further debate – unless the context of a planned project element changes. This contrasts in productivity an unplanned or piecemeal approach in which each AT program or facility individually requires consultation, budgeting, reporting, and debate.

11. Setting Clear Expectations

An AT plan created and approved as described above has clear expectations for all stakeholders. Developers understand that site plans require active transportation accessibility. Business owners can plan for when and how they will be better connected with foot and bicycle traffic. Municipal staff and council will know that when road renovation is planned for a segment that's part of the cycling network, cycling facilities will be an integrated part of the plan, not an add-on. Current and prospective homeowners will know when they will gain improved walkability and bikeability in their neighbourhoods and can plan accordingly. Families seeking to relocate and new businesses evaluating their prospects will see a planful approach to a more livable community.

12. Becoming Shovel Ready

An approved AT plan with its costed and staged implementation schedule ensures that there are always “shovel ready” projects when grant opportunities arise. The grant application windows are often quite short – having a list of shovel ready projects ensures funding opportunities can be seized.

Embracing active transportation begets community change – change in personal habits, change in perspective on the part of city council and staff, and change in public acceptance that roads are for moving people – people of all ages and all abilities who deserve the opportunity to choose to move in a way that's best for them each time, and deserve to arrive at their destination safely every time. Change begins with guided and informed discussions as an AT plan is developed and is then anchored on the foundation of community consensus around that jointly developed plan.

The investment of time and money in developing a plan delivers solid benefits through the process itself as well as through ongoing community support and a more productive implementation. Every community benefits by going down this path.