Seven Years Later:

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Evaluating Impact on Active Transportation in Haliburton County

Executive Summary

Authors: Kate Hall, M.Sc. Planning, Sue Shikaze, H.B.O.R./B.Sc.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of the work of the Communities in Action Committee (CIA) on changes to active transportation (AT) policy, infrastructure and activity in Haliburton County, a small rural community in Ontario. The study period covered activities from 2005 to 2012.

Background

Active transportation (AT) refers to any form of human-powered transportation, including but not limited to walking, cycling or using a wheelchair.[i] There are unique challenges in rural communities that can present barriers to accommodating AT. For example, low population density, large distances between destinations, a strong car culture, and limited financial and human capacity can all be obstacles to AT planning and implementation.[ii] However, there are also many benefits, regardless of the size of community. Active transportation in small towns plays an important role in improving economic vitality, public safety and population health.[iii]

Haliburton County is a rural region located in central eastern Ontario. The county comprises four municipalities, with a combined population of approximately 17,000. Tourism is one of the main economic drivers. The county has a large number of seasonal residents which increases the population by approximately 45,000 in the summertime.[iv] In Haliburton County prior to 2004, there was little in the way of policy or initiatives focusing on active transportation or creating a healthy built environment, and there was limited community awareness about AT and its benefits.

The Haliburton County Communities in Action Committee (CIA) was formed in 2004 to promote and plan for AT as a strategy for creating a healthy, active community, using the following approaches:

- Education about and promotion of AT
- Collaboration and partnership with multiple sectors
- Planning and design for AT
- Advocacy for healthy public policies to support AT

The CIA is a coalition with representatives from a variety of sectors in Haliburton County. Its members represent public health, economic development, cycling, trails, business, and healthy community planning. In all its work to improve conditions for AT, the CIA forges partnerships with a variety of other groups, including county and municipal governments, community-university research programs, seniors'

planning groups, and local schools. CIA initiatives have targeted both municipal governments and the community-at-large.

Between 2005 and 2012, CIA initiatives included conducting community-based research in the Villages of Haliburton and Minden to identify levels of AT activity and on-the-ground problem spots, development of maps to promote walking and cycling routes, development of active transportation plans for Haliburton and Minden, numerous presentations to municipal councils, public awareness campaigns and making policy recommendations for consideration in the 5 year review process of Official Plans that guide land use planning . The CIA has also hosted numerous workshops for the community and local decision makers, bringing in outside 'experts' to increase knowledge about the potential and opportunities that exist in Haliburton County.

Strategy

Until fairly recently, most of the research on the implementation of AT initiatives has taken place in urban settings. This study was intended to document and evaluate approaches for planning and promoting AT in rural areas. There is also little evidence linking the effectiveness of interventions that change the built or policy environment with behavioural and health outcomes;[v] measuring impact can be challenging. The evaluation strategy described in this paper attempted to measure progress towards these goals from a number of perspectives.

The key questions that the evaluation research sought to answer were:

- What has changed in Haliburton County from 2005 to 2012 with respect to policy, planning decisions, infrastructure, awareness and behaviour around AT?
- What has been the CIA's contribution to these changes?

Methods

Multiple research methods were used in order to provide a variety of data that could then be analyzed using triangulation. This was done to make sense of what was observed. The following methods of data collection were used:

- A community survey was done in late 2011 to measure self-reported AT behaviour and compare selected results with a survey done in Minden in 2007. An AT trip was defined as using self-propelled activities such as walking or cycling either to get to or get around in Haliburton and Minden. A convenience sample was used through an online survey and print copies were distributed at various public locations.
- An observational study was done in the summer of 2012 to count active travellers in Haliburton and Minden and compare results with data from similar studies done in 2005 and 2007 respectively. A screenline method developed by Alta Planning & Design was used, where there is an imaginary line and any person using AT that crosses it from either direction is counted. Counts were done by volunteers at 12 locations in Minden and 11 in Haliburton. A total of 3 hours were done at each location, between the hours of 8:30 – 9:30 am, 12:00 – 1:00 pm and

4:30 – 5:30 pm. All counts were done on either Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday, however the three count times for each location were not necessarily done on the same day.

- Nine key informant interviews were conducted in 2011 with municipal staff and councillors to get their perspective on the contribution that the CIA had on changes to AT policy and infrastructure. There were key informants from each of the four municipalities as well as from the county. Each interview was later transcribed by the interviewer, and the transcriptions were analyzed, sorted and grouped into themes, highlighting key comments.
- An inventory was done to identify what new policies exist to support AT, what new infrastructure had been completed, who were contributing partners, and what and how many walking and cycling events had taken place.

Results

There were 275 surveys completed in 2011, with 160 respondents who identified with Haliburton and 115 with Minden. Comparisons were done with survey results from Minden residents in 2007. Eighty-three percent of respondents in 2011 reported mostly or sometimes using AT as defined in the Methods section above, compared to 44% in the 2007 survey. The primary destination was shopping (84% in 2011, 76% in 2007). The top barriers identified to using AT were distance (41% in 2011, 18% in 2007), weather (38% in 2011, 18% in 2007), time (29% in 2011, 15% in 2007) and unsafe traffic conditions (26% in 2011, 8% in 2007). The top things identified that would encourage more AT were more and better quality sidewalks (40% in 2011, 15% in 2007) and bicycle facilities such as paved shoulders and bike lanes (45% in 2011, 27% in 2007). The majority of respondents felt that it was somewhat or very easy to get around using AT (85% in Haliburton, 87% in Minden).

Observational studies in Haliburton and Minden showed higher levels of AT activity in several locations compared with the studies done in previous years. The number of cyclists observed overall was quite small in relation to pedestrians. In Haliburton, five screenline locations showed increases in active transportation activity. Three of these, all downtown locations, were considerably higher in 2012. Six screenline locations showed decreases, and of these, three were notably lower in 2012. There was very little active transportation observed outside the downtown. In Minden, nine screenline locations showed increases, with four of these considerably higher in 2012 compared to 2007. Three of these locations were near downtown, and one was at the Cultural Centre, home to the museum, library, art gallery and environmental centre. Much of the observed activity was students, since the elementary school is also located nearby.

Four broad theme areas were identified from the key informant interview data: outcomes, impacts, who contributes and future opportunities.

1) Outcomes are short- and medium-term changes that have taken place. Key informants identified outcomes such as increases in people walking and biking, changes to policies in official plans, implementation of plans to support AT, infrastructure improvements and increased awareness about AT.

2) Impacts are changes that are broader in scope and may take longer to emerge. Two key impacts were identified: a cultural shift within municipalities and decision makers to incorporate AT into planning, policy and projects, and the CIA being identified as a credible resource. Respondents indicated that the CIA acted as the champion for AT and played an important role in raising awareness and increasing understanding among municipal staff and decision makers. Key informants gave an average rating of 4.2 regarding the CIA's contribution to observed changes, on a scale of 1-5 where 1 = no contribution, i.e., the changes would have happened without the CIA, and 5 = very important contribution, i.e., the changes would not have emerged at all without the CIA.
3) Identifying who contributes to AT work. It was recognized that various local, provincial and federal organizations, agencies and governments all play important roles to affect changes around AT.
4) Future opportunities to position AT in Haliburton County. It was identified that active transportation could be further positioned as a way to enhance accessibility, and as a tourism draw.

The inventory documented changes in the built environment and in policy, as well as identifying events and activities, and contributing partners. Highlights of the inventory include:

- Four Official Plans were updated during the study time frame. All added new policies that specifically refer to active transportation.
- Several major infrastructure projects were completed during the study timeframe. In Haliburton, the two main downtown streets were redone, with improvements that included the addition of sidewalks, curbs, bike racks, new street lighting, plantings and decorative paving. In Minden, the Riverwalk and boardwalk trails were completed, and a pedestrian bridge installed across the Gull River that flows through town. These trails provide a pedestrian route from neighbourhoods and the cultural centre into downtown. Approximately 30 km of paved shoulders were added on six county roads. Share the road signs were installed across the county.
- Education and awareness activities have included an annual cycling festival, commuter challenge, Share the Road and pedestrian safety campaigns, and World Record Walk.
- The CIA has collaborated with numerous partners. In particular, public health has been a key on-going partner.

Discussion

Over the years, the CIA has taken a two-pronged approach to influence opinion, awareness and action on active transportation, targeting both municipalities and the general public. The evidence from this study indicates that the range of the CIA's activities to promote, advocate and plan for AT have successfully contributed to changes in policy, infrastructure, community awareness and individual use of AT. The following schematic illustrates the ways in which the data supports the CIA's contributions, as well as showing other potential influences.

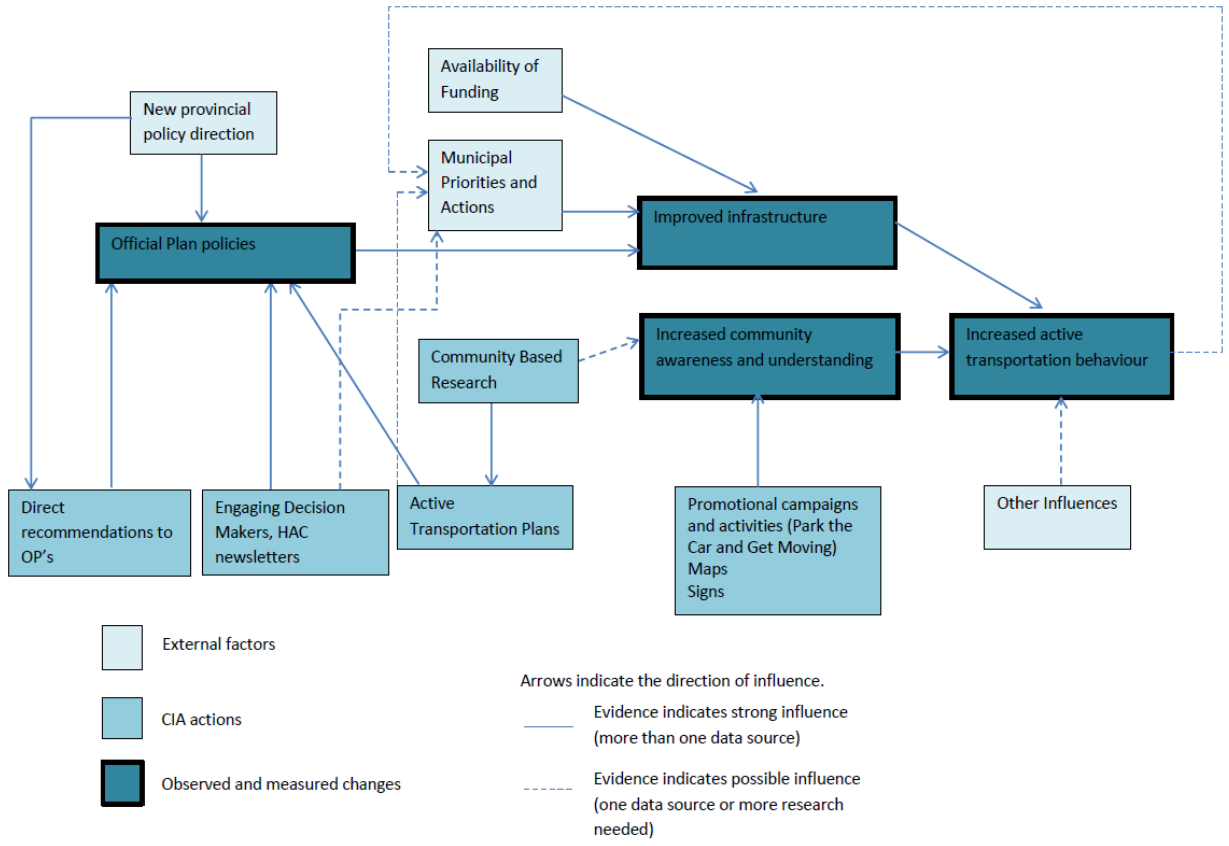

Figure 6: Roadmap for Discussion

The CIA has used several strategies to raise community awareness of why, where and how to use active transportation, so-called 'soft measures', with the goal of increasing AT activity. Strategies have included promotional campaigns (e.g. Park the Car and Get Moving), development of AT maps and regular media presence in local newspapers and on radio. Conducting community-based research provided a means to gather input from the public as well as raise awareness of active transportation. Survey data also indicates that promotional initiatives such as the Share the Road campaign were effective.

The availability of safer and more convenient infrastructure is an important factor that contributes to changing behavior at a community level. It was beyond the scope of work of the CIA to invest directly in infrastructure, so it was an important goal of the CIA to influence decision makers, through raising awareness, making a strong business case and providing sound evidence, with the desired outcome being municipal policies and investments that supported AT. The development of AT Plans for Haliburton and Minden, and providing input on amendments to Official Plan (OP) policies are two examples of strategies that influenced municipal policy and positioned the CIA as a credible resource. The success of this approach was evidenced through the responses of many key informants, who agreed that that CIA contributed in a significant way to observed changes. The efforts of the CIA aligned with other factors such as availability of funding and emerging municipal priorities, and added to existing municipal capacity.

Limitations

The authors oversaw the research and are members of the CIA, and as such have an interest in the study findings. This is a potential source of bias, however it also lends a level of expertise which may enable a greater level of detail in the analysis. The multiple research methods used to collect information and triangulation of the data helped to provide a measure of balance to the reported findings.

For the comparative data (survey, observational studies), different tools and approaches were used. The survey was updated for clarity, and a convenience sample was used rather than a random sample as in 2007. The primary limitation for the observational study was that counts were done of people using AT only and therefore the 'denominator' or the overall number of people in town on the day of the counts remains unknown. The protocol for counting was slightly different in 2012, with a defined screenline being used to count active travelers at each location, versus counting people travelling from a variety of directions, which was the approach used in 2005/07. Counts were not done as systematically in previous years; therefore, comparisons between count data in 2005 and 2012 should be interpreted with caution. The interviewer of key informants was a member of the Communities in Action Committee and had knowledge of the work of the CIA. It is possible that some of the key informants were aware of this association and that this may have influenced them in providing more socially desirable responses.

Conclusions and Implications

The study findings indicate that:

1. The CIA contributed in a significant way to the observed changes in policy, planning and indirectly to infrastructure to support AT.
2. The CIA added to the capacity of municipalities around AT planning, particularly in the early stages through engagement activities and promotion and later through the OP review process.
3. The promotional efforts of the CIA were successful in raising awareness of AT, which in turn contributed to more people using active transportation more often.
4. Investments by municipalities in infrastructure to support AT such as sidewalks, trails, and paved shoulders are an effective means of getting more people walking and cycling. Lack of infrastructure to support safe and convenient active transportation is a barrier to choosing this over travel by automobile.
5. AT Plans for each village that were created by the CIA have been effective resources for municipal planning.
6. The CIA's involvement in the 5 year review process of county and local Official Plans was a successful strategy to affect policy change.
7. All of the interventions that took place between 2005 and 2012 have contributed to an increase in the number of people walking, and to a lesser degree cycling, in the villages of Minden and Haliburton.

This research demonstrates that implementation of AT initiatives is achievable in small, rural communities. There are unique opportunities for partnerships, and the scale of rural towns means that services and destinations are often in close proximity. While the overall geography can be vast, typically

there is a concentration of services around key hubs, which can be the focus for AT promotion and planning.

Leadership on active transportation can come from community groups and enhances municipal capacity. Especially in small, rural communities neither the municipality nor community groups can do this work alone. Working with these groups presents an opportunity for municipalities to capitalize on existing energy and resources, and build relationships to undertake new and innovative ways to create a healthy community.

Increases in levels of active transportation are achieved through a number of interventions implemented simultaneously over time. The benefits of walk and bike-friendly environments cross many sectors. Planning for AT needs to be an integral part of community planning and decision making, and involve the participation of a variety of stakeholders such as public health, business, education, environment and government.

Measurement, monitoring and evaluation interventions to improve the conditions for AT are required in order to better understand the social and financial returns on investment. Evidence is needed in order to make the case for continued investment. It may be difficult to draw direct cause and effect relationships between specific interventions and outcomes. However, communities can work to measure what changes occur and what/who contributed. Community-based research can be an effective approach to evaluation. It is a legitimate and accessible methodology that community groups can use to measure and evaluate the effectiveness of their work. Using multiple methods of data collection, both quantitative and qualitative, is useful in order to triangulate and validate results.

For a community-based group, influencing change takes time. Having and articulating a consistent vision over time to the community and to municipal officials is important. Threaded throughout is the importance of building and maintaining positive relationships with key stakeholders. There are many factors at work when it comes to changing active transportation behaviour. The activities of the Communities in Action Committee were identified as contributing in a number of steps along the way, indicating that taking a variety of approaches and targeting a range of audiences can be an effective way to get the message to penetrate and ultimately affect change.

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[i] Public Health Agency of Canada http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hp-ps/hl-mvs/pa-ap/at-ta-eng.php

[ii] Transport Canada. (2010) Sustainable Transportation in Small and Rural Communities.

[iii] Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. (2012) Active Transportation Beyond Urban Centers: Walking and Bicycling in Small Towns and Rural America

[iv] Haliburton County Development Corporation website http://haliburtoncdc.ca/about-us-and-the-community.html

[v] Raine, K.D., Muhajarine, N., Spence, J.C., Neary, N.E., Nykiforuk, C.I.J. “Coming to consensus on Policy to Create Supportive Built Environments and Community Design”. Canadian Journal of Public Health; Vol 103, No 9 (2012):Suppl.3:S5-S8.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Sue Shikaze, sshikaze@hkpr.on.ca

705-457-1391 x3249

www.communitiesinaction.ca