

Complete Streets in Southern Ontario: Project Overview

In summer 2012, the Toronto Centre for Active Transportation (TCAT), a project of Clean Air Partnership, conducted survey-based research in Grey and Bruce Counties, Niagara Region and the City of Mississauga. TCAT's objective was to investigate the status of Complete Streets in these jurisdictions and to gain a better understanding of the barriers to implementing Complete Streets policy and projects. TCAT collected online surveys from a diverse set of respondents from each jurisdiction including planners, engineers and public health staff, active transportation and accessibility advocates and elected officials. Survey responses from Grey and Bruce Counties were analysed and incorporated into a case study available below. Survey respondents' names are kept confidential.

	Grey County	Bruce County
Population	92,568	66,102
Land Area (km ²)	4,513.21	4,087.76
Population density (people/km ²)	20.5	16.2
Jurisdiction type	Regional Munic.	Regional Munic.

“In many rural areas, single-industry community economies are weakening, young people are migrating out to larger urban areas, and rural areas are greying...there is a need to develop alternatives to the car” - Owen McGaughey (<http://renewcanada.net/2012/transit-free-zone>)

Geography and Government

Grey County and Bruce County are both upper-tier, regional municipalities on Georgian Bay in Southern Ontario. . Each municipality drafts and adopts their own Official Plans (OP), as do their constituent cities, towns and townships.

The subject area is largely rural with several small urban developments. The City of Owen Sound (pop. 23,000) is the largest city or town in the Grey Bruce subject area. Recreation and tourism represent significant components of the local economy and each county is home to both national and provincial parks. Grey and Bruce Counties share a public health agency, the Grey Bruce Health Unit (GBHU).

Transportation Policy Context

Transportation in Grey and Bruce is guided by county-level and lower-tier municipal official plans and policies. However, Transportation Master Plans (TMP) are relatively new. The County of Grey, for example, began working on their TMP this year (2012). Many lower-tier municipalities in Grey and Bruce do not any have specific transportation plans while others have adopted their own transportation policies that further articulate the county-level OP policy. For example, the City of Owen Sound adopted a TMP in 2010.

The GBHU supports and promotes planning for active transportation and has partnered with local planners and engineers to establish the Grey Bruce Active Transportation Committee. The GBHU has also recommended that Complete Streets language be included in Owen Sound's five-year Official Plan review. At present, no plan or transportation policy in the Grey Bruce subject area uses the term 'Complete Streets'. However Complete Streets is gaining momentum in the region and survey results indicate support for amongst municipal planners and engineers.

Six of nine survey respondents described a completed or ongoing active transportation project in their community. In 2010, the Ministry of Transportation constructed 66km of 1m paved shoulder on Highway 6 (from the Town of Tobermory to Mar) as part of the Ontario Ministry of Transportation's Southern Highways Programs. Both counties have consulted the public to identify priorities for connecting the Highway 6 paved shoulder route to other active transportation corridors. The City of Owen Sound has widened pedestrian rights-of-way and upgraded accessibility infrastructure in their city core.

Grey and Bruce have supported the development of an extensive network of off-road trails. Recreational trails are guided by Bruce-Grey Trails Network Master Plan as well as local off-road trails plans and projects (for example, Owen Sound Safe Trails Network). Projects aimed at improving off-road trail connectivity are ongoing in both counties. Despite these efforts, the Grey Bruce region remains auto-dependant (GBHU, 2009).

Barriers to Complete Streets

The Grey Bruce region faces a unique set of transportation challenges. Survey respondents identified several barriers to Complete Streets in Grey and Bruce County, many related to policy. However, land use and demographic shift each give rise to significant transportation challenges.

Grey and Bruce Counties are largely rural. Trip origins and trip destination tend to be highly dispersed. Population densities do not currently support local transit; only the City of Owen Sound operates a local transit network (Owen Sound Transit services four inter-city bus routes).

The Region is aging (Statistics Canada, 2011) and aging regions typically demonstrate increasing auto-dependency (especially where no transit service is offered). Thoughtful transportation policy is needed to prevent increased auto-dependency and improve mobility.

Development in Grey and Bruce is strongly linked to the regional and provincial roadway network. Often, regional roads serve as a primary transportation corridor, commercial zone or retail high street within one of the regions' constituent cities, towns and townships. This development pattern places significant peak-hour demand on regional roads. Making matters more challenging, secondary/local roads are not designed to offer adequate relief for peak hour congestion or to serve as safer alternate routes for active modes. Survey respondents describe that most elected officials are unwilling to modify automobile rights-of way or street parking as part of a strategy to ease congestion and improve mobility for all modes.

The GBHU has made active transportation a priority and as a result senior management and elected officials in the region endorse the public health benefits of active transportation. However, survey respondents explained that the long-term economic case for active transportation in Grey Bruce is not as well-articulated. Without a long-term business case for Complete Streets in the region, concern over increased operating costs due to snow removal and maintenance and increased capital cost associated with retrofitting predominantly late 19th and early 20th infrastructure and built form will continue to dampen support for Complete Streets among elected officials.

Proposed Complete Streets projects (such as road diets and bike lanes) are often met with opposition. Survey respondents describe that some members of the public view Complete Streets projects as a challenge to their lifestyle rather than a strategy for creating safer streets for all. Opponents express a general fear of loss of local built form character, parking space and automobile lanes. One survey respondent expressed that Complete Streets projects are often viewed as “the work of outsiders” (survey respondent, 2012).

In Grey and Bruce, active transportation is “viewed as a tourism initiative and not a health or community planning initiative” (survey respondent, 2012). Accordingly, the majority of active transportation projects in Grey and Bruce are “adjunct to the [region’s] trails tourism program” (survey respondent, 2012). Much of the active transportation infrastructure in the counties is exclusively recreational or off-road and provides limited access to everyday destinations (for example: employment zones, retail centres). Survey respondents expressed that this approach to transportation planning is a key barrier because the unique infrastructure needs of utilitarian cyclists and pedestrians are often overlooked.

Opportunities and What's Next?

This case study research signals a need to advance the dialogue on Complete Streets in small towns and rural environments in Ontario.

The rationale for Complete Streets in rural and small town Ontario is strong. It is clear, however, that proponents of Complete Streets must strengthen the way that this rationale is communicated to key decision makers. To support the efforts of planners, engineers and public health professionals in Grey Bruce, more research is needed to support the successful application of Complete Streets in small towns and in rural environments. Particular attention must be paid to how Complete Streets support retail activity and increase economic efficiency in small towns and rural environments. To better articulate the case for Complete Streets in Grey and Bruce, precedence from other small towns and rural communities, such as [Sheboygan County, Wisconsin](#), are important.

Survey respondents reported that recreation and tourism initiatives have helped to put cycling and walking on the municipal agenda in Grey and Bruce. Without question, future cycling and walking infrastructure improvements must continue build on and increase connectivity with the region's extensive trails network. However, one survey respondent believes that in order to make active transportation and Complete Streets common practice, county governments must recognize that utilitarian cycling and walking is different from recreational cycling and walking (survey respondent, 2012).

Proponents of Complete Streets in Grey and Bruce must galvanize their efforts to attain buy-in amongst elected official and senior municipal management. Progress in other rural communities similar to Grey and Bruce indicate how Complete Streets policies make streets better for all road users. However, policy *expresses* political will, it does not create it (survey respondent, 2012).

Ruder, S. (2012). Transit-Free Zone, Renew Canada. Accessed June 26th, <http://renewcanada.net/2012/transit-free-zone/>

Statistics Canada. 2012. Grey, Ontario (Code 3542) and Ontario (Code 35) (table). Census Profile. 2011 Census. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-XWE. Ottawa. Released May 29, 2012.

<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E>

(accessed July 5, 2012)

Statistics Canada. 2012. Bruce, Ontario (Code 3541) and Ontario (Code 35) (table). Census Profile. 2011 Census. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-XWE. Ottawa. Released May 29, 2012.

<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E>

(accessed July 5, 2012)