

## **Policy and Decision Maker Perspectives on Youth Health and the Built Environment**

### **Summary of the Results of Focus Group Discussions**

*ENACT project: Environment, Nutrition and Activity  
Optimizing Investments in the Built Environment to Reduce Youth Obesity*

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### **Purpose of the Study:**

Each year governments invest millions of dollars in recreation facilities, trails, and other elements of the built environment. At the same time, studies show that youth obesity is increasing, and physical activities decline with age. The larger research project of which this is a component examines linkages between the built environment and youth obesity in Nova Scotia. A principal goal is to understand the role of the built environment (e.g., land mix, walkability, recreation facilities), and the policies that affect its use, in contributing to youth obesity. In other words, we are investigating the potential of better targeting of government funding to infrastructure and policy interventions that have healthier outcomes.

This component of the research involves a study of policy and decision makers who influence choices about investments in the built environment, primarily at the local level. Our objectives are to understand the factors that policy and decision makers consider, to examine the barriers that may limit

evaluation of health outcomes in decision processes, and to identify the potential for policy and planning interventions that may represent viable strategies for optimizing government investments in the built environment.

Sometimes readers may note that participants get some facts wrong, or may exaggerate to make a point. This is the nature of everyday discourse; it does not reduce the usefulness of the outcomes. Focus group discussions are extremely helpful in showing how participants in community processes understand their roles and the factors that affect decision making around these important issues. This summary highlights the significant findings from discussions with policy and decision makers talking about how government decisions may affect options for youth health.

### **Method:**

We conducted a series of seven discussion groups between 21 July and 22 October 2008. We recorded and transcribed all sessions for analysis. Following an introduction about the purposes of the research, the facilitators used a series of questions to lead the discussion. Sessions lasted from 80 to 120 minutes. A total of 44 people participated (see Table 1).

In the summer of 2008 we began by piloting the discussion questions with staff from a large municipality in Nova Scotia: this session is referred to as FG1 (facilitated by K MacKay and T McHugh on 21 July). Following the pilot we revised the question guide (see Appendix 1) and conducted two more focus groups. FG2 took place on 29 July in Antigonish, and FG3 in Lower Sackville on 31 July: K MacKay, P Manuel and T McHugh participated in those sessions. Kate MacKay transcribed the results of all sessions.

On 22 October 2008 we completed four discussion groups with members of the Atlantic Planners Institute, the professional body for planners in the region. We offered a professional development workshop on the theme "Planning for physical activity: what planners can do". We presented background on the relationship between health and the built environment

and on issues related to youth health and behaviour for 90 minutes prior to initiating the focus group discussions. The four individual discussion sessions (API1, API2, API3, API4) went for about 80 minutes each; K MacKay, P Manuel, J Grant, and K Kronstal facilitated the sessions. We recorded sessions for transcription: one recording (API3) began late and missed catching responses to question 1. While 32 planners registered for the API workshop, only 28 participated in the discussion sessions.

*Table 1: Participants: in the seven focus groups:*

FG1 = Focus group 1: NS urban planners and community development staff [n=4]
FG2 = NS municipal councillors, recreation staff, health authority staff, school board staff [n=8]
FG3= NS recreation staff, trails staff, parks staff, health authority staff [n=4]
API1 = urban and rural planners, planning consultants NS, NL, NB [n=6]
API2 = planning consultants, provincial and rural planners, NS, NL, NB [n=7]
API3 = rural planners, planning consultants, provincial planners NS, NL, NB [n=8]
API4 = planning consultants, provincial planners, rural planners NS, PE, NL, NB [n=7]
<b>[Total n = 44]</b>

Although we had hoped to ensure the breadth of the sample, we recognize limitations to it. The sample of participants is neither random nor necessarily representative. We used a purposive sampling strategy for the first three focus groups; the participants self-selected for the planner discussion groups. In selecting the initial focus group participants we sought to involve a range of job categories including parks and recreation staff, municipal councillors, health authority members or staff, school board members or staff, town managers, and public works staff. We wanted both urban and rural participants, and male and female participants. Focus group 2 proved most representative with two councillors, two recreation staff, two

school board staff, and two health authority representatives; it had four women and four men. Table 2 indicates that overall the sample included more men than women.

*Table 2: Discussion groups by gender*

<b>Group</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>
FG1	2	2
FG2	4	4
FG3	2	2
API1	5	1
API2	5	2
API3	4	4
API4	6	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>16</b>

The first three focus groups involved participants only from Nova Scotia. The API sessions attracted participants from across the region and beyond. Table 3 indicates that 29 of 44 participants resided in Nova Scotia.

*Table 3: Participants by province of residence*

<b>Province</b>	<b>NS</b>	<b>NB</b>	<b>NL</b>	<b>PE</b>	<b>ON</b>
Participants	29	8	5	1	1

All participants in FG1, FG2 and FG3 were engaged at the local level either as elected representatives, staff, or volunteers. The participants in the API sessions came from a variety of perspectives: 15 worked for local level governments, eight were consultant planners, five were provincial planners, and one was a student.

This report presents an overview of the results of the discussions by the salient themes that emerged. We have used the following overall themes to organize the discussion.

- *Built environment:* In this section we indicate what participants said about elements of the built environment. We defined built environment to include the elements that humans construct or

modify to live our lives. It includes things like land use patterns, buildings, and exterior spaces.

- *Activities*: This theme includes the kinds of activities that participants mentioned in responding to the questions.
- *Issues*: We identify the issues that participants noted specific to youth, to their communities, or to dealing with health and physical activity.
- *System*: This category includes comments that participants raised about how government works and their own roles in trying to affect policy outcomes.
- *Topics*: General comments related to the overall topic of youth health, obesity, and physical activity are included under this theme.
- *Approaches*: The final theme indicates the types of approaches that participants offered to try to deal with the issues discussed.

Because of the nature of the focus group discussion process, results varied across groups. Group dynamics invariably influence the nature of outcomes, and individual experiences can take discussions in divergent directions. For this reason, it would be misleading to count the number of references to particular topics or to try to quantify the outcomes in tabular format. Instead, we identify how many of the discussion groups discussed particular topics. We generally present the themes that arose more frequently first, then go on to themes raised less commonly. Quotations give readers an idea of the tone of the comments received, but cannot be taken to represent “typical” responses.

In general the discussion groups indicate that while all participants shared concerns about the problems associated with youth obesity, action on issues related to physical activity for youth were primarily being addressed by recreation and related staff. Recreation staff and other staff within local governments saw recreation and trails as linked to a mandate for health promotion. While the built environment plays a role in facilitating physical activity, recreation staff placed stronger emphasis on programming and other supports to enable youth to participate. Several emphasized the benefits of built environment infrastructure like trails and parks to allow

physical activity for all, regardless of means. Recreation staff focussed their discussion primarily around issues related to funding and access to programming. They saw the contemporary interest in health as an asset to making their issues high priority in government resource allocations.

School board staff members have attended to issues of healthy eating in schools and are adjusting policy accordingly. They were aware of the need to encourage physical activity but faced challenges in moving that agenda forward. Fiscal requirements to consolidate schools, competing demands for curriculum time, and insurance issues for facilities represent significant barriers that staff identified.

Municipal councillors described the discussion sessions as educational. While they were aware of issues related to youth health in general terms, some were unfamiliar with the way that decisions about the built environment can affect youth health outcomes. Their interest and receptiveness to the topic indicated that further engagement of municipal decision makers in the research project can be very productive.

Although planners deal with policies and regulations about the built environment in their daily activities, most of the participants had limited knowledge about issues of youth health. Their approach to the built environment reflected the principles of sustainability and new urbanism that currently motivate the profession: e.g., advocating mixed use, compact form, higher densities, walkability, transportation alternatives, and open space networks. They accepted the health rationales as additional “grist for the mill” within paradigms they already follow. Many indicated, however, that they had rarely considered youth as an important population group in their planning work and would need to adjust that practice in future. The project’s ability to put youth health on the radar of local government is a first step towards affecting decisions about the built environment.

We were unsuccessful in attracting town managers, town engineers, or others involved in local public works to the sessions despite concentrated efforts to issue invitations and follow up with staff. These individuals play

key roles in advising councils and making financial decisions about the built environment. We need to find better ways to engage them in the discussion as the project proceeds because several participants identified them as potential barriers to changing the way that policy and development decisions about the built environment and youth health are made.

The sections that follow summarize key points discussed, occasionally illustrated with quotations from participants.

## **BUILT ENVIRONMENT**

This section summarizes what participants said about elements of the built environment. We defined built environment to include the elements that humans construct or modify to live our lives. It includes things like land use patterns, buildings, and exterior spaces.

### ***Common themes across all focus groups: built environment***

**Trails:** Many participants in all focus groups talked about the use of trails by youth and other members of the community. Trails are strongly associated with fitness and physical activity, and were described as an effective investment for government. Participants saw these freely accessible resources as a major feature of the built environment that can contribute to healthy living. Some concerns about safety were acknowledged.

**FG1-** NS Planner: *Developing the facilities is always an issue. There's also what they call the fear of the unknown. Will children be safe using the infrastructure that we're building and will parents feel safe letting the children use that infrastructure? One of the things that we heard during the active transportation plan that we hadn't really expected was that folks would come back and say "I'll use the trail that will get me to my school, but I won't use it during the week. I use it on weekends when there's a lot of families out". They use it for recreational purposes, but "When I'm going back*

*and forth to school there's not as many people there and I'm afraid I might get attacked."*

**Parks:** Like trails, parks are freely available, but their location may affect access. Unless they are located near residences, they may not provide the desired benefit.

**Rinks/arenas:** Participants in every focus group raised the topic of rinks or arenas as features of the built environment that present opportunities to youth. Demand for ice time was described as a concern in some communities. Issues of cost for participants and funding demands on governments often appeared in association with this topic.

**Centres** (community, health, youth, lifestyle): Participants in all groups talked about physical centres (buildings) that might serve as a focus either for youth or for the wider community that would include youth. Such centres would provide locations for offering services or enabling activities for youth. References to centres proved fewer in the API focus groups.

**Built environment form and pattern:** Participants in all groups discussed forms and patterns in the built environment. While the term "built environment" was commonly understood by planners, participants in some of the other focus groups asked for definitions of the term. In the groups with planners, several participants noted connections between pattern (eg, mixed/segregated use or density), form (e.g., street pattern), and behaviour (e.g., car dependency, food access).

**API3:** NS Planner: *We've got two new high schools built in [our] county. One of them is just on the fringe of [town]. The other one is completely outside any of the urban communities. To me that just defeats the whole purpose of schools related to greater concentration of the kids that they serve. Someone mentioned access to fast food. I can remember years ago that the big concern when I was working in [western city], was about video arcades being built or developed in the neighbourhood service centres too close to the schools. They were concerned that the kids were going*

*to be dealing drugs and whatever else, but I don't think anybody really thought about where fast food outlets are located related to where the kids are and just how accessible fast food is to the kids. Something else -- just a comment -- we also don't have transit in our area though we did at one time and our physical pattern is such that it would lend itself very well to a transit system. I think that would have a positive effect because the bus doesn't go everywhere, so if you're using the bus as opposed to the car you're at least walking to wherever the bus stop is.*

**Car use:** All focus groups discussed car use in relation to access to destinations youth may wish to reach. Focus groups containing planners made many more references to car dependency than did other groups. Participants often discussed the need for parents to drive youth to school or other places.

**Infrastructure:** All groups discussed the general topic of infrastructure to refer to roads, bridges, sidewalks, parks and other elements of the built environment provided by government.

#### ***Common themes for several focus groups: built environment***

**Sidewalks:** At least one participant in all but one of the focus groups (API4) referred to the quality or availability of sidewalks as an issue in the walkability of communities or in the ability of youth to walk to destinations. Participants described the lack of sidewalks in rural areas as a barrier to safe walking and cycling.

**API2 – NS Planner:** *I will start with the bad first. How do [our practices] undermine healthy living? If you look at our subdivisions, and our built environment, it's very old: probably 1975. So there was no consideration to trails or consideration given to sidewalks. We don't require sidewalks. No connectivity between roads in subdivisions -- huge, probably 750m [long]. So things like that, for one example, really impacts on the ground. To support healthy living some of the planners and the recreation*

*people work pretty closely with the active transportation people now.*

**Playgrounds:** Participants in all but one focus group (API2) mentioned playgrounds or play areas. Sometimes the playgrounds were in association with schools; often participants were discussing the needs of younger children than the target population of the study.

**Fields:** Participants in all four API focus groups mentioned fields as elements of the built environment that affect options for youth. FG2 participants also discussed fields. Sometimes participants referred to organized sports requiring fields. In some instances, participants suggested youth need spaces to play “pick up games” in.

**Pools, water parks, lakes:** Participants in FG2, FG3, API1, and API2 spoke about access to water features in association with youth activities (like swimming, boating, skating).

**Paved surfaces:** Only one of the API groups (API2) discussed paved surfaces, but the theme came up in all three summer focus groups. Hard surfaces facilitate some kinds of activities (like skateboarding or biking). Some participants identified the lack of hard shoulders in rural areas as a limitation to safe cycling.

**Gym:** Only one of the API groups (API3) discussed gyms or the activities that occur in them, but FG2 and FG 3 (which included several recreation staff) raised this topic with some frequency. Gyms were seen as positive places for recreational programming. Participants raised issues of cost and access as barriers to their use.

## ACTIVITIES

This section summarizes the kinds of activities that participants mentioned in responding to the questions.

### *Common themes across all focus groups: activities*

**Walking:** Participants in all groups discussed walking as a transportation mode, as a recreational activity and as a means of improving health. References to walking were ubiquitous in the transcripts. Participants saw walking as an inexpensive and ubiquitous activity embedded in daily life. They noted ways in which government policy at various levels could affect the amount of walking young people include in their lives. They thought that encouraging more walking would be positive for health.

**Skateboarding and skating:** All groups discussed skateboarding and skating activities. Participants appear to associate skateboarding specifically with the target age group: this is the kind of programming municipalities often provide for youth. In some groups, participants indicated that developing skateboard parks provided an opportunity for youth engagement. Skate parks were described as a common undertaking of communities in the region. Some participants thought such parks may engage more youth than common everyday activities like walking (although statistics suggest otherwise). One participant in API1 thought that skateboarding may not address the needs of female youth.

**FG1-** NS Planner: *You have to provide a welcoming environment in an area where they want to be and you have to provide the opportunities for them to go out. That's one of the things that when we went through the AT [Active Transportation] Plan we found out. They want to be able to access their skateboard parks. So if you're going to find a spot to get youth more engaged and get them more active, you have to look at what they want to do. There's two things that youth are really doing more than cycling or walking right now and that's skateboarding and in-line skating. Providing the opportunities for them to do that are significant, so if you are going*

*to you have to widen the sidewalks. Not even necessarily narrowing the streets but give the illusion that the streets are narrow: that changes the whole environment. That and then also traffic calms it. Without even doing any major extra measures all you've done is just make it a much more appealing environment for everybody, including a lot of motorists who don't really necessarily want to have to deal with speeding traffic. But providing these opportunities in areas where youth want to go. Look at the problem skateboard parks -- and you know one of the biggest complaints we heard during the AT plans -- is, "Yeah, we're building skateboard parks but I can't use my skateboard to get there".*

**Biking:** Participants in all groups discussed biking. Biking serves as a mobility tool, as a recreational opportunity and as a means of independence for youth. Safety concerns came up frequently in association with cycling, especially on roadways: in urban areas heavy traffic were seen as worrying parents and professionals, while in rural areas soft shoulders were mentioned as a limitation. Off-road use of BMX and mountain bikes was often discussed with trails. Participants noted the challenge of getting youth in the target cohort to wear helmets or to accept rules for their activities.

**Unorganized play / non-competitive sports activities:** The need for general play came up in all discussion groups. Participants noted that youth need not be enrolled in organized sports to engage in physical activity. They indicated that the cost of organized sports presents a barrier to youth from less affluent families while over-programming may be an issue for more affluent families. In some cases they lamented that youth and children have insufficient time for unorganized or free play. Several engaged a storytelling style that contrasted memories of their own youth with the constrained experience of their own children's or grandchildren's youth.

**FG2:** NS School board staff: *As educators we have to also begin to become more creative in terms of how we perceive the facilities and the infrastructure that we need in rural communities. I taught in rural communities without a gymnasium and I used the outdoors and the kids, through the program, were active. I think we have to*

*promote -- whether it's through education and/or community- we have to promote the unorganized free play, creative play. That is missing with kids. And it starts with kids and it goes beyond kids through young adults. I look at hide-and-seek and kick-the-can and all these low-organized games that are organized by the kids themselves, but kids no longer engage in these things. And even getting a little more structured to road hockey or parking lot hockey.*

NS Councillor: *Hopscotch.*

NS School board staff: *Yeah. You don't see that happening today as you did when we were growing up. I think we have to kind of re-educate kids and families. I think you have to get the parents on board because they are only in school five hours a day and what are they doing the rest of the day? We can't do it alone. We need to get the parents involved and buy into this. It's not just facilities I guess.*

### **Common themes for many focus groups: activities**

**After hour use of schools:** Five groups (FG1, FG2, FG3, API1, API4) commented on issues related to the use of school buildings and grounds after school. In general, the school facilities were seen as a potential asset for activities for youth: places where communities with limited facilities could find opportunities for physical and social activities. FG2 spent the greatest amount of time discussing this issue: that group included the widest diversity of participants, including school board staff. Issues connected to insurance and liability came up as a barrier to after hour use of school facilities (see below).

**Ball sports:** All groups except FG1 and API4 discussed ball sports (including baseball, basketball, volleyball and ball hockey). Often the regulation sports were contrasted with unorganized activities.

**API3- Planner:** *I think there needs to be spontaneous places to play as opposed to a regulation sized soccer field that the city has scheduled all day every day of the week. But just to have a pick up*

*game or whatever or kick around the ball or baseball, or fly a kite or whatever the case may be: the spontaneous play areas seem to be lacking. We develop every little square inch that we can and there's not a lot left over for spontaneous playing. I think [the facilitator] was saying, the kids want to go out and play street hockey. If people are trying to regulate against that then where is our society going?*

**Hockey:** Five groups discussed hockey (FG2, FG3, API1, API3, API4). While many references discussed the popularity, cost, or commitment of the organized sport, some comments talked about informal games of shinny or street hockey.

**ATV/snowmobiling:** Four of the groups (FG2, FG3, API, API2) talked about off-road use of vehicles. FG3 discussed the importance of ATV use on trails for some rural youth. The significance of multi-purpose trails came up in association with this topic.

**FG3 – NS Recreation trail staff:** *[My daughter's friend] operates a dirt bike legally on the trails but he also runs everyday on the trails. If that opportunity for him to use his own OHV [off highway vehicle]-- which is one part of his life-- were taken away from him then I think it would change very much his perspective on how he uses what kind of facilities. Therefore, he would feel detached, I think: alienated from his community if he didn't have that available to him. It's very hard for me in the position that I'm in to try to get that across sometimes: that excluding one use doesn't make everybody all of a sudden come to a facility. Everything in moderation. It can all be accommodated. One doesn't preclude the other in my community.*

**Skiing / snowshoeing:** Winter sports (other than skating) came up in four discussion groups (FG2, FG3, API1, API2).

**Screen time:** Participants in four of the groups (FG2, FG3, API2, API3) indicated that the time that young people spend on computers or in front of

TV may limit their engagement in other activities. Some thought that “Wii” might encourage physical activity.

**Facility use:** Four groups (FG2, FG3, API1, API3) discussed the general use of facilities for activities for youth. Participants noted that some communities need more opportunities for youth to have access to facilities. Policies around the use of facilities can affect options for youth activities.

### *Themes particular to some focus groups: activities*

**Other sports:** A range of sports activities came up in some focus groups including soccer, surfing, tobogganing, dancing, running, hopscotch, Nordic walking, tumbling / gymnastics, ice skating, in-line skating, roller-skating, paddling, hide and seek, kick the can, tennis, fencing, golf, lacrosse, swimming, kite-flying, and hunting/fishing.

**No-cut policy:** One focus group, FG2, made frequent reference to a “no cut policy”. A school board in NS had adopted a policy that all children should be able to participate in school sports, regardless of ability level or means. This policy directed intramural and other sports programs in the school district. The target of the policy appeared to be related to inclusion, but physical activity was an important benefit of it.

## **ISSUES**

This section identifies the issues that participants noted as they spoke specifically about youth, and how they related to physical activity, health, and the wider community.

### *Common themes across all focus groups: issues*

**Youth behaviour:** Participants in all groups discussed elements of youth behaviour. In most cases this involved describing assumed characteristics of the activities of young people, such as their desire to associate with their

peers. In some cases, participants suggested that policy or regulations limit the activities of youth. Sometimes they linked youth to undesirable behaviours like vandalism or breaking rules.

**FG2 – NS Councillor:** *We have a by-law where we prefer that they're not driving on Main Street. Our Main Street is small and we have a lot of seniors around and they're up and down Main Street-- the devils -- with their bikes. I see a lot of them without their helmets on. It's just a matter of picking up the phone and getting an RCMP officer down there and saying “Get after them.”*

**Youth engagement:** In all sessions participants affirmed the desirability of engaging youth in advising policy and decision makers. Some participants described successful examples of youth engagement and empowerment.

**API3 – NB Planner:** *We had a region where they had an outdoor skating rink. Vandalism, everything that was shown here, the youth were just tearing it apart. The older generation that had spent a lot of money on building it and getting government funds to build it, they weren't amused. The planning commission was asked to come in and mediate this whole thing. We're not talking about policies. We're not talking about relations. We're just talking about talking to both groups and trying to get them to -- how about I say -- engage. This happened about five years ago. We asked the older people to give the reins to the younger folks, the youth. Today that skating rink is nicer than it was five years ago. Because those children are going home, they're saying “Hey Dad, do you have an extra window? We'd like to put that in the shed so that we can see people skating.” So all of a sudden the window comes in and it's free. We don't have to go get government funds to go put in a window. The doors, they're unlocked. They don't have to lock them anymore. Because they're taking care of their -- and we're talking about twelve to fifteen year olds who have taken a directive role in their community and they've taken ownership. Now the parents are coming back to us and they're saying, “We should have thought of that a long time ago because now we don't have any problems, because they're taken care of.” They're flooding it in the winter*



time. They're cleaning it in the summer time. They're roller-skating on it in the summer time. They're ball hockey playing. They even have two holes for a tennis court and things like that. So they're using that to the maximum. It's become their space. We go there -- I'm not that old -- but we go there and I'll tell you we feel kind of like outsiders, because we don't roller-skate and we don't have skateboards and things like that. But there's no more graffiti there. They've painted their own stuff. They've brought paint from their homes to paint whatever they graffitied. So it's kind of a success story.

**Urban/rural/suburban:** Participants in all of the sessions noted differences in access to facilities or in recreational behaviour in different types of environment. For those in rural areas, distance presented an issue of concern. The topic came up less frequently in the API workshops; it was discussed most frequently in FG3. Attitudes and perspectives about issues such as physical activity and health may vary in urban, rural, and suburban areas.

**FG3** – NS Recreation trail staff: *My direction comes from a very political realm so it really depends on the body that is directing or making these policy decisions. Just as an example, say you were to have a rural municipal council that has four fisherman, six farmers, and a retired school teacher. When the majority of your council has lived their entire lives where their work is their play, is their recreation, is their exercise, is their lifestyle the idea of saying "Go take a walk." "Well I just walked four kilometres in the woods and hauled my wood out." It's such a huge part of their life that sometimes it's very hard to get them to separate that not everybody has those kinds of opportunities or that everybody has those kinds of things incorporated into their general lifestyle. You know, if we're sitting behind a desk or we're sitting at a computer screen or whatever all day sometimes it's hard to make that distinction for them. So that tends to be a little bit of work sometimes.*

**Funding:** All groups discussed the role that government funding played in facilitating development of the built environment infrastructure and in promoting programming related to the facilities. Municipal units across Nova Scotia differ in the resources they have to spend on facilities and programs. Recreation staff in FG2 emphasized the role of funding in facilitating opportunities for access among those who could not otherwise afford to participate.

**FG2** – NS Councillor: *We also fund the breakfast program through that [money]. Basically the role the agency plays is we give money, offer recreation programs, hire instructors. Basically it's usually tennis or swimming. Surfing's getting more popular.*

**Attitudes:** All groups talked about attitudes. Participants indicated that attitudes influenced behaviour, and discussed their desire to change some attitudes. Health authority members see themselves as committed to that task. Participants in all sessions seemed to see themselves as potential agents of attitudinal change.

**FG2-** NS Health authority staff: *I think in terms of the role of the community health board a lot of our work revolves around education of the public and helping them to change attitudes about their role in determining their health.*

#### ***Common themes for several focus groups: issues***

**Parents:** All groups with the exception of API1 discussed parents and their role in influencing the behaviour and attitudes of youth. Participants often discussed parents driving children places. Parental concerns about safety were seen as a key determinant of youth opportunities; participants recognized the same behaviour in themselves. In general, the discussions portrayed parents as powerful potential barriers to or enablers of youth health and activity.

**API3** – NS Planner: *I think one of the biggest issues that was raised that sort of stuck with me was the issue of safety and how a lot of parents are saying, "Well, it's great but I'm not going to let my kid take her bike to school." My sister won't let her daughter who is 11*

walk to school because she has to cross [a city street] which has to be one of the busiest streets around; even with crosswalks people don't stop. The school is within a five minute walk away, but she'll drive her to school and it's all about safety. Perceptions I think. ... I and a couple of friends had this discussion last night and we were like, "God when we were ten and 11 we were running on the road of all hours of the day and the night." My mother pushed me out the door in the morning and I was gone all day. I swam at the lake. I have a 16 month old now and I'm thinking, "She's not going in the lake at ten years old all day by herself!"

**Cost:** Six of the groups (with the exception of FG1) raised the issue of the cost of participating in activities as a barrier to youth and their families. (See also Low income below)

**Climate / winter:** Six groups (all except API4) discussed the challenges presented by the winter climate in the region. Issues included the problems of safety on snow-clogged or icy sidewalks.

**For youth / Focus on youth:** Six of the groups (with the exception of API4) talked about initiatives that were aimed at or focussed on youth. These initiatives were done for (rather than with) youth. [This perspective contrasts with the notion of youth engagement discussed above.] In this model, the participants describe themselves as encouraging activity through programs or facilities they determine that youth need.

**API1-** NB Planner: *Sometimes I know in our area there tends to be a little bit of resistance to intensification. Probably more so than you may see in a larger city where people are more used to it. There tends to be a bias against denser types of urban development. I think our local decision makers have to realize that we are living in a world of limited resources. I think that they have to realize that in terms of promoting healthy living, the more you make things available at a passive level, the more success they are going to have at encouraging youth and other segments of society to get out*

*there and to get active without necessarily having to go through the big facilities.*

**Youth issues:** Participants in five groups -- FG1, FG2, FG3, API2, and API4 -- discussed issues related specifically to youth. In some cases they noted challenges to engaging youth or they mentioned health issues related to young people. Some identified gaps with meeting the specific needs of this age cohort, or recognized that they knew little about the interests of the age group.

**FG2-** NS Recreation staff: *I'm just realizing as I think about this more, I'm not the programmer in our department but I think we have a gap there. We have day camps, physical activity day camps, for ages five to 12, so it might catch some grade sevens. We have a program that has been going on for a number of years now called the mayor's challenge program and our day camps fall under that. We also have learn-to-skates; we have the women's hockey program; we have the softball tournament. But we don't have a lot that's really geared to that age group: teens. Most of them are children and adult focused. We do have a few family-type events. One that comes to mind is we just had a bike week back in May, first week of June, and we had some family trail rides. And a mountain bike race that had an event for teenage kids.*

**Low income:** Participants in all groups except FG1 and API4 raised the issue of low income presenting a barrier for some families wanting to participate in activities. The topic was discussed most frequently in the focus groups with non-planners participating. Some participants recognized that households asking for funding assistance provided through provincial and local programs might feel stigmatized for needing aid. In some cases, respondents suggested that high incomes might dispose parents to reduce children's opportunities for physical activities.

*Q: We've talked a little bit about some of the barriers already but what do you see at the barriers for youth health, healthy eating, and physical activity in your area?*

**FG2-** NS Health authority representative: *I don't have a problem addressing that because it seems that it's always in our face. And number one I think that it's low-income families who don't have sufficient income to eat healthy or to be physically active. I often say that often times these low income families are victimized or stigmatized because of their lack of income. I know that single parents, their main goal is to feed their children and to say that you're not feeding them healthy...They're trying to fill them with whatever. Also, for children to get into organized sports there are costs of equipment and what have you, which are not always available to children who are from low-income families. And I also think one other point is that as parents we have put so much attention on the marks that our children are getting in school that we are keeping them out of the backyards playing games and what have you and just being children in our goal to make them excellent. Over-the-top. I feel so strongly about that. I feel sometimes that we're taking the childhood away from our children.*

**Safety:** The issue of safety came up in five groups: FG1, FG2, FG3, API2, and API3. Parental concerns about safety were often described as impediments to youth engaging in activities such as cycling or walking to school. Interactions with vehicles presented the greatest concern expressed.

**Crime:** Specific concerns about crime or crime prevention came up in four sessions: FG1, FG2, FG3, API1. (Other groups, eg API3, sometimes mentioned vandalism or graffiti but did not describe the behaviour as crime.)

**Population:** Four of the groups (FG2, API1, API2, API4) discussed issues related to population change, including aging communities and population decline. Participants suggested that changes to the built environment and resources for programming for youth may be affected by population change, growth, or decline.

**API4-** NS Planner: *The biggest challenge is that in most of the rural areas, probably half of our planning commission is in*

*unzoned areas: we don't have any jurisdiction as far as land use goes. They are lightly populated. The huge challenge is that there are large rural schools and as the population ages and declines there's certainly a lot of pressure in making sure whether or not you can keep these schools open: it's hard. Many of the students probably are way too far away to actually walk or bike to school so most people have long school bus rides. That's certainly a challenge as far as having programs at the schools.*

**Peers:** Three groups (FG2, FG3, API3) talked about the role of peers on youth. Peers were seen as affecting behavioural choices such as risk taking, eating habits, or participation in physical activities.

**Insurance:** Concerns about liability and insurance to reduce the risk to schools or governments came up in FG2, FG3, and API1. Use of school facilities after hours depends upon resolving this issue: participants suggested that school boards and local governments may be at odds over who has liability or who should take out insurance. The issue was a special concern to school board staff.

**Special needs:** FG2 discussed the requirements of special needs youth for programming during the summer months when schools are not in session. One participant discussed a boating program designed for special needs youth. A participant in FG1 spoke about "scooter friendly" paths, while a planner in API2 talked about a program to require staff to use a wheelchair for a day in order to experience what others faced.

**Gender:** Issues related to gender came up only in two groups. In FG2 a participant noted that girls in NS were less physically active than boys. In API1 one participant suggested that skateboard parks did not meet the needs of girls as much as they did those of boys.

### *Themes particular to some focus groups: issues*

**Aboriginal:** The facilitator in API2 asked about Aboriginal groups as a follow up to a participant's comments about hunting and fishing activities. Later in the discussion a participant talked about different cultural practices and activities among Aboriginal communities.

**API2- NL Planner:** *There's no fences, although they get around by snowmobile- that's the only way you can get around- what you can use in the winter time- because the roads -- they just don't snow plow them -- snowmobile is the way to get around. So you either snowmobile or you walk. You can walk through people's yards. There's no real ownership where people own their lot or whatever. You're free to walk through it because there is no fences, no restrictions. Certainly in that way it's a healthier environment for the kids.*

**Culture:** This topic came up only in API2, partly in connection with Aboriginal communities but also in establishing a contrast between Canadian and European practices.

**API2- NS Planner:** *I think one of the biggest changes that needs to occur is a cultural change. Go to the Copenhagen example where all age levels bike. It's probably one of the most active communities in Europe. It's a cultural thing that's taught from the beginning. People bike! You see moms and they have a kid in front of them and a kid on the back, biking everywhere. Being very active from the get go. I think that's a cultural shift that we need to see. It comes down to education and a lot of the concepts that were spoken of but a cultural shift that is reflected in our council and our politics and our policies which I think needs to be driven through the education of all those levels including the 12 to 15 year olds and that age category.*

**Media / marketing:** Participants in FG3 spoke frequently about issues of media and marketing. Some of the comments reflected the influence of the media in shaping food preferences: ad campaigns for a particular burger

came up several times. Elsewhere the participants talked about their own efforts to market their programs and initiatives, and the role that their concern about health and obesity may play in that.

**FG3 – NS Recreation staff:** *If we want to put on a recreation program then what we're going to do is we're going to promote those health benefits: "Okay, this is a program". Would it have existed without those health issues? Well, maybe, maybe not. That might be a hard thing to decide but definitely I think that those health issues have a huge influence on what we do for sure.*

**NS Recreation parks staff:** *Just to add a little something: we at the municipalities are usually driven by either giving our money or trying to get money: to draw on all our initiatives or to assist those in driving theirs. So some of the changes when I say 'flavour of the month' - if ten years ago you were going to build a multi-purpose facility then you would call it a multi-purpose facility. These days if you want to do it, then you call it a wellness centre.*

**NS Recreation trails staff:** *Or a lifestyle centre.*

**NS Recreation parks staff:** *Or a lifestyle centre.*

**Facilitator:** *It's the way you package it?*

**NS Recreation trails staff:** *It's the marketing.*

**NS Recreation parks staff:** *'Flavour of the month' will get the attention of those reviewing your applications; that is true.*

We note that participants did not flag any special concerns related to minority or immigrant populations. Nor did they refer to youth who may be the target of bullying or discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or other characteristics.

## SYSTEM

This section summarizes comments that participants raised about how government works and their own roles in trying to affect policy outcomes.

### *Common themes across all focus groups: system*

**Government role:** Participants in all groups talked about the role and responsibilities of government. Promoting health and physical activity was already included in this mandate for some participants; others suggested that government could do more.

**FG2-** NS Recreation staff: *We develop policies and by-laws around the built environment. The sub-division by-laws, part of that would be the five percent of park land dedication or cash-in-lieu. Most of the roads in the county are actually Department of Transportation roads, but there are some that the county would construct and maintain and related to that also sidewalks. So, we also have a role there in terms of that kind of facility. We fund directly some trail development and maintenance on a trail that the county is building and maintaining itself. Then we provide grants to community organizations for park developments.*

**Government coordination / collaboration:** The need for greater coordination and collaboration across departments within governments and between levels of government proved a recurrent theme in all focus and workshop groups. Different departments have different approaches to issues. While health issues are important to some, others have different priorities. One participant called local government “dysfunctional” due to its political fragmentation.

**APII** – NS Planner: *But we’re talking about an area that’s losing population which still has six municipal units and six different recreation departments for a population of [amount] and dropping. It’s absolutely ludicrous. The problem is -- the recreation directors, try as they might are succeeding where they can in spite of the*

*political structure there because they are all limited in resources. They do have some cooperative programs and policies amongst them but the problem is it all comes down to what the direction is from each one of their councils. In our case it’s so disjointed. The recreation directors are basically working by themselves in their own little environment, trying to promote things within their own towns where they really don’t have the resources to take on any grand scale projects.*

**Role of planning / planner / professional:** In all of the discussion groups, participants referred to their own roles or the roles of their profession in promoting issues related to health. Sometimes participants revealed frustration because of their inability to influence outcomes. Several indicated that they thought they should have greater influence.

**APII** – NS Planner: *In terms of the negative aspect of what I see we are losing -- and I think that this is not maybe unique to Halifax -- other places it seems to me have the same problems. We are losing schools and this is really outside of our control. It’s really a planning issue. We should have influence over school boards or maybe just the general province to present this vision of a healthy community so that kids can walk. Because everybody is saying that kids cannot be active because they cannot walk to school. But right now the schools are much bigger and they are located in a strategic location next to the highway and far away and so on. All these community small schools - - one, after another, two to three a year are closed and converted into residential developments or something else. This residential component is strong and we try as planners from municipalities to slow down the process. Put the brake on it, through whatever means we can because we think there will be a time when we are looking for the land, especially if our regional plan is talking about increasing density on the peninsula. There will be more people, more young professionals with their families on the peninsula. Everybody will be looking for a school and maybe there will be a problem. Those people will not come to the peninsula and the increased density will not happen because*

*there will be no infrastructure for the families to exist. Then it's quite difficult.*

### **Common themes for several focus groups: system**

**Implementation:** All groups with the exception of FG3 talked about implementation. Participants noted with special concern the barriers and challenges to successfully implementing particular initiatives. Some of the challenges reside within government, with insufficient resources. Others were laid in the lap of the target community sector: the youth.

**API1** – NS Planner: *A couple of times we've tried to set up temporary skateboard parks in hopes of creating an improved attitude on the part of the public about having them in the kinds of spaces that are central and visible but yet give youth some space. The skaters themselves have sabotaged it by being foul to people around them: by just being disrespectful, stealing from properties adjacent to them to create play surfaces to skate on. I'm not saying it's their fault. I understand ... about pushing boundaries and pushing off authority and stuff. But it does create a disconnect between the broader community when you are trying to develop support and find the resources and the money to actually create these things and the very people they're for are actually very busy alienating those who are actually going to do the work and put in the money. So that's a difficult thing to grapple with as it's proven at least in our case to be the undoing of two great initiatives.*

**Politics:** Participants in six of the groups (with the exception of FG1) identified problems with “politics”. This label sometimes acknowledged the influence that electors had on political leaders, and sometimes served as a code word to describe decisions that staff might not recommend. Participants recognize that decisions about facilities are not made on a purely “rational” basis.

**API4** – NL Planner: *We share a lot of the same concerns as PEI and New Brunswick that there's always this demand and political acceptance that community A has got a rink, community B wanted a*

*rink, and then you know who's coming in the door right behind that, community C. So we're trying to move away from that right now. This is unfortunately still only at the staff level. We're trying to do a pilot project for one area of the province, but our fear is that as soon as we go to implement this new strategy, politicians come into play. "I'm not giving it to that crowd because they voted Liberal." Those sorts of things: pure partisan politics. There is fear that that could happen again.*

**Leadership:** Five groups (FG2, FG3, API1, API2 and API4) talked about leadership and the need for champions to promote the health agenda. Issues of leadership were linked to discussions of politics and policies in some settings.

**API4:** PE Planner: *On the island what we really need is a political champion. One person, just one person who would take it on and say, "We really have to do some planning, for all the good things that go with it". Well, up until now we haven't got it.*

**Monitoring / Measuring:** Participants in five groups (FG1, FG2, FG3, API1, and API4) discussed measuring and/or monitoring performance to give government feedback on progress towards objectives. Most often, participants indicated a greater need for monitoring and for tools for measuring progress. To some extent, participants suggested that improved measures might strengthen their position to make their case within government.

**API1-** NS Planner: *We need more data supporting the benefits because what I find that through our process in the municipality, we don't really have time to do the research and analysis to prove that this brings actual monetary value for savings. Sometimes the decision-making process is based on the political, on the perceived benefit, or the pressure of the group or community or whoever is at the table. If we as planners have a tool or have an argument to present that this particular direction mattered and will bring a measurable saving or benefit to the community to the municipality then it will be a different discussion. We need to operate, it seems to*

*me, like engineers. Because when I sit with them, they will give me - they don't really talk too much but they say "This costs this and there is a limitation because of factor five" and that's it. And we as planners, there is a way that we can rosy everything and try to convince, but there is a point that they may say "This factor will be such and such. For this will bring this measurable improvement or measurable complication to what we have right now". And I look forward to this study to be completed because there may be something that will be delivered to us that we can use.*

**Time, timing:** Five groups (FG1, FG2, API1, API3 and API4) discussed issues related to time or timing. Planners often mentioned long-term planning. Some participants indicated that the "time was right" to raise issues related to health and the built environment, while others indicated that the time had passed to make appropriate decisions about how to organize communities.

**API3** – NS Planner: *I think certainly the tools are there but how quickly we might implement any change is probably a big question as well because the built environment is already built. We're not going to change that aspect -- I don't think we will very easily be able to address it maybe to a greater extent than we have.*

**Partnerships:** While the topic of partnerships animated the participants in FG2 and FG3, the issue received only one mention in FG1 and API4, and did not arise in the other API groups. The topic seemed especially important in the recreation field. Participants talked about a range of partnering opportunities and approaches on a variety of levels.

**FG2-** NS School board staff: *From a board member's perspective on health concerns addressed at the [school] board it's usually passed unanimously if it's to improve the health of a child. From a bike rack, to putting money in to extend the sidewalk so kids can walk in a safe area, it's done. It's a motion from the board. It's done in staff. They see the value I suppose. Of course staff will bring stuff to the board members. It's a great partnership and a great working relationship.*

**School policy:** Four of the groups (FG1, FG2, FG3, API1) raised school policy as a topic. The theme drew the greatest interest in FG2, probably because the group included two school board staff members. Participants discussed a range of policies such as the type of food served in cafeterias, availability of cycling infrastructure, and after school use of facilities. The issue of where schools are located and the need to bus students to school presented a concern to planners. While planners focussed on the need for local schools so that young people could walk, school board staff spoke more about food policies, curriculum programs, and facilities at the schools. Recreation staff members were interested in after hour use of the schools for recreational programming. Participants noted that government policies and decisions at many levels affect schools and the health outcomes of youth attending those schools.

**FG2-** NS School board staff: *With this activity we're trying to encourage the kids to bike to school. From the school board, they're ensuring that bike racks are available for them. So that would be a partnership process.*

## TOPICS

We report general comments related to the overall topic of youth health, obesity, and physical activity under this theme.

### *Common themes across all focus groups: topics*

**Active transportation:** The phrase "active transportation" or the acronym "AT" appeared in every focus group discussion. It often included discussions of walking and cycling to school, work or other activities. Participants sometimes described active transportation programs as the foundation of partnerships across departments and between government and community groups.

**Transportation:** General discussions about transportation featured prominently in the transcripts. Participants noted that many households rely on the private automobile for transportation.

**Bus / transit:** References to the use of bus or transit by youth appeared in all discussion groups. In some cases participants saw access to bus use as potentially desirable for youth to enhance options for mobility and independence: this was especially true in discussions about urban and suburban settings. In other cases, students' need to use the bus to travel to school was seen as negative because it meant less opportunity to walk or to participate in after-school activities. Some groups spoke about the stigma associated with using public transportation. Planners spoke of the links between transit and built environment pattern.

**API2-** NL Planner: *I take the bus. There's a real stigma about taking the bus. I don't know how many people have said, "The bus is for the poor and the kids." It's foreign to take it because I can afford a car. Well, I have a car but it's completely foreign and it's stigmatized. So that attitude has to change.*

**Policy:** All of the groups discussed policies, regulations, and rules that affect the built environment and activities within it. In some cases participants described policy that supported health, but in other cases they noted a problem with coordinating policy across departments with different mandates.

**API4** – NS Planner: *I manage amendment applications, so it's very site specific. I don't see that there's a large role in what I do day-to-day in creating built environments that support a healthy lifestyle -- although it could factor into any decision making, it doesn't really. In terms of my agency as a municipality we do land use policy. It's not really clear on the connection between creating policies that support a healthy lifestyle. I don't think that that always comes into play when we write secondary plans for our growth centres. I suppose that it could play a larger role in those because our rural areas have very basic planning. In terms of parks and trails, that is largely managed by our recreation and parks*

*department which is not integrated with our planning department. Parks are done through the subdivision process: that's handled by our development officer, not in the planning department necessarily. So there's a [policy] disconnect there I guess.*

### **Common themes for several focus groups: topics**

**Food / healthy eating /gardens:** Six of the seven groups (with the exception of API1) discussed food, healthy eating, or the benefits of growing food. Two of the API groups talked about the location of fast food venues. Some participants noted that schools have changed menus to promote health. Some indicated the challenge of encouraging youth to eat healthy options: drawing on personal experience from being a parent, one professional suggested that parents may not be able to control what their children eat.

**API2** – NB Planner: *My children are just past being teenagers and you cannot make a 15 year old eat what he doesn't want to eat when he's not sitting at your table. So, I think that we have to make -- I don't want to say as planners -- I think politicians have to be aware of the power that they hold when they make decisions about locations of things like fast food places. I'm going to just leave it right there, because you cannot make decisions for 15 year olds.*

**Health mandate:** FG2, FG3, API1, API2, and API3 groups talked about health mandates. Several respondents explicitly linked recreation and trail development with the mandate to promote health within local government.

**FG1-** NS Planner: *Because they do trails, and of course that's what youth health is all about -- youth health and physical activity levels.*

**Obesity/ overweight:** Facilitation questions used language related to healthy living, yet the topic of obesity, fat, or overweight came up in five groups. Given that facilitators made presentations to the API session on issues related to youth obesity prior to the session, we expected the topic to arise even more commonly than it did. While participants in FG2 and FG3 spoke frequently about obesity as a problem, the topic came up infrequently



in FG1, API2, and API3 and not at all in API1 and API4. Several participants linked family dynamics and food options to obesity.

**FG3** – NS Recreation staff: *It behooves the school to provide healthy [food] choices. Period. Home: same thing. We've seen it time and time again. When you have large, obese moms and dads you can look in the crowd and find their kids because the apple doesn't fall too far from the tree.*

**Physical activity / physically active:** These phrases appeared once in API2 and once in API3, but not in the other planner groups. By contrast, the terms appeared frequently in the sessions including community development staff (FG1) and recreation staff (FG2, FG3). Promoting physical activity is a dominant theme for recreation staff: they see it as strongly linked to health. Other participants link the idea of physical activity directly to recreation staff.

**FG2-** NS Councillor: *We certainly look after the youth. Our recreation director, she's very engaged in physical activity so I think that sprays out from her to other people. So, that gives you some idea. Unfortunately, if I was on the recreation committee I'd probably know a little more. Even as a councillor you don't know what's going on in every aspect of the municipality. I don't think we're expected to, but maybe we are.*

**Fitness / fitness testing:** The topic of fitness did not come up in the API sessions; it came up once in FG1. By contrast, FG2 and FG3 (with recreation staff participants) discussed fitness, fitness centres, or fitness testing fairly extensively.

**FG2** – NS Recreation staff: *What we do in this program is we come in with a certified fitness instructor. We used to do the BMI but we found that the BMI is not sophisticated enough to give us a good read. Out of Cooper Union in the States we have done the fitness-o-gram where we have done each child in their first few weeks of the program on several performance factors from weight to flexibility and then at the end of the year during the last two weeks we go in and we test everybody again. We have six years now of data on all*

*these children participating in the program which we've sent on to all the district health authorities, HPP, etcetera. The program's been a huge success in dealing with the initiatives.*

## **APPROACHES**

This section summarizes the types of approaches that participants described using or considering to try to deal with the issues discussed. In general participants saw government as having a role in facilitating improvements to youth health. Approaches and strategies that they discussed reflected a perception that they had the right intentions but not always the means to implement improvements.

### ***Common themes across all focus groups: approaches***

**Creating opportunities:** The issue of creating opportunities came up commonly in all discussion groups. Participants in FG3 spoke often about the opportunities already available in the community.

**FG3** – NS Health authority staff: *As far as opportunities, there are a lot of resources out there for people. In the city anyway, I've got a directory on my bulletin board about all kinds of physical activity opportunities and they list KidSport and the Fitness Association of Nova Scotia. There's a youth-led training program so that youth leaders can become fitness trainers. There's loads of different things. It's how do you get that information out there to let people know that it exists and how do you alleviate some of the red tape associated with it? ... There's loads of youth-led opportunities that exist although there are still some challenges and wrinkles to iron out with them.*

### ***Common themes for several focus groups: approaches***

**Education:** In six groups (with the exception of API1), participants saw an important role for education in changing understanding and behaviour.

**FG3-** NS Recreation staff: *I think there is still a lot of work to be done in terms of educating people on what are healthy choices and what are the benefits. And somehow making a real strong personal connection with people. That's sometimes hard to do but I think education is one of those key ways to get to people.*

**Awareness:** Raising public awareness of issues related to health and the built environment came up in discussions in six groups (with the exception of API1).

**API2 -** NS Planner: *I think what we need is just to put the issue on the radar. Not with just planners, but with council, the decision makers. It's not really on the radar right now so we need stronger policies and new policies and probably a lot more collaboration between departments like recreation, engineering, planning, and development.*

**Lobbying:** Participants in five of the discussion groups – FG2, FG3, API1, API3, API4 – talked about the role of lobbying in changing government policy and practices. In some cases they discussed parents' role in lobbying; in other cases, they talked about staff lobbying for change within government.

**Research:** Several participants looked forward to the results of the research that would come out of the group discussions. Five groups (FG1, FG2, FG3, API1, and API2) talked about the role of research in facilitating their effectiveness in influencing outcomes. Research provides a tool to professionals to use in persuading decision makers of the need for action. Participants indicated that they do not always have adequate access to the most current research in the field. Sometimes participants pointed to "research" to support their arguments.

**FG1-** NS Planner: *We'll be meeting later this week with a school location committee to deal with where a new school should be located in a major community to the east of [town]. So we try to influence that, especially since research has shown that the location of schools is one of the single biggest determinants of where*

*potential growth will happen and that's been established through research [at a local university].*

**Change, innovation:** Members of four discussion groups (FG2, FG3, API 2 and API4) raised the need for innovation and change to address health issues effectively. Discussing ways to motivate change intensified the emotional level in some of the groups.

**API4-** NS Planner: *The whole structure has to change. There has to be a clear structure. Not a bit here, a bit there, things over here. You've got different governments with different agendas that cross and fight with each other and in between provinces, and that's just a complete and utter mess. People say to me, "Oh but we're a big country, we need to have this." What a crock of shit! Sorry. It's just rubbish. That is the biggest excuse going. And so we've got to believe in it and we've got to bring about. You know I'm thinking about Obama these days. We've got to bring about change and he's onto something big.*

**Sustainability:** FG2, API1, API2, and API4 group participants brought up sustainability as an approach to contemporary planning. The contribution of sustainability to health outcomes was not made specific.

**API4-** NS Planner: *It's the bigger picture. We have to start looking at the way in which we arrive at our policies and rules. We need to look at our legislation. Do we have the right tools to do the job? I question it in probably every province. ... What is sustainability? ... But how do we talk about this little piece when really we can't even answer the question because we probably would have some differences on what sustainability means.*

**Best practices:** Four groups (FG2, FG3, API2, API4) described learning from best practices in other areas. Best practices provide professionals with contemporary models to emulate and with tools they use to persuade decision makers that viable alternatives exist.

**FG3-** NS Recreation parks staff: *I think we as professionals have to, on a daily basis, if not a weekly basis, be cognizant and aware*

*of what's out there. What healthy choices are available that we can access and from that that we have the processes to go ahead and get them done. It's great to get the youth involved when you can but if you are not a programmer and if you don't deal with youth on a daily basis then you deal with statistics. You deal with best practices. If I'm going to go out and help the community design a playground we need to know some of what's going on out there.*

**Community development:** Participants in FG3 and API2 talked about using a community development approach that promotes partnerships and engagement.

**FG3-** NS Recreation staff: *That whole community development model, that's what we're all about, is the partnering. I think if you talk to most people that know anybody who works in the recreation field we've got, I think, quite a positive reputation of being departments and organizations that do partner. We do hardly anything on our own. We go out there and look for other groups that have a similar mandate.*

**Being proactive:** Participants in two groups (API1 and FG3) discussed being pro-active in promoting youth health.

**Planning theory:** Singular references to ideas current in planning theory appeared in all groups except FG3. Most revealed principles associated with new urbanism (e.g., mixed use, pedestrian-friendly design) or crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED).

**Themes particular to some focus groups: approaches**

**Population health approach:** One participant, a health authority representative, in FG2 spoke about the population health approach.

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## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Preliminary analysis of the discussion group results indicate that local and provincial governments are aware of the significance of health issues in their communities and the potential role that the built environment may play in affecting young people. Participants raised specific concerns around the location and size of schools and the need for taking an approach that would consider health issues.

Participants indicated that they want to act to advance the mandate of youth health. Recreation staff appeared most confident that their work already supports the health agenda. Their comments revealed a perspective that focussed on providing facilities and programs that encourage people to engage in physical activity. School board staff recognized the importance of promoting health but focussed their attention on facilities, activities, and policies within the schools. Council member participants were receptive to the idea of promoting health, but uncertain that local government had the means to achieve it. Health authority members concentrated on educating people about health. Planners supported the need to promote health, but focussed on the challenges faced in changing the built environment and people's practices within it. In general, participants suggested that effective action on reducing obesity would take a level of coordinated action between governments and other agencies not currently seen in the region, but possible with the right directives and processes.

The policy and decision maker focus group transcripts revealed clear evidence that group members found the discussion groups engaging and productive. Participants gained knowledge and insights from each other. The greatest learning appeared to occur within the most diverse focus group, FG2. A council member participant remarked on the effectiveness of the event.

FG2 – NS council member: *I think, honestly, I think there should be more of what we are actually doing here today. Because what*

*happens is it brings awareness. We need to get to the provincial and federal levels to promote this with some funding...I think this today is the starting of something great here, with what we are trying to accomplish here. I've never heard any of this around any other table that I've sat at, especially not our council table.*

Of the strategies that participants offered for making health concerns a more significant issue in decision making, none explicitly dealt with how to optimize investments in the built environment to reduce youth obesity. In the absence of explicit research evidence that demonstrates unequivocally where local and provincial governments can optimize their investments, participants concluded that putting health on the agenda depends on lobbying and raising awareness about the importance of improving the future prospects of the next generation.

We should be cautious to interpret the results of the focus groups in concert with other data about how youth use the built environment. Policy and decision makers necessarily see the issues from their own perspectives: they are the people planning and programming facilities in our communities. They see these facilities, like trails and parks, as central to opportunities for youth health. Our on-going investigations of how youth in this age cohort actually use the built environment will help to illustrate another perspective. We are working with a large sample of young people to track their physical activities in space. We are conducting family interviews to understand how families make decisions that affect youth mobility and independence in using the built environment. We are organizing focus groups with youth to gain insight into their concerns about the built environment. In the summer of 2009 we will engage youth in design charrettes to get a better sense of how they envision options to design the built environment to meet their needs. Ultimately we will bring the results of our multi-disciplinary research project together to develop conclusions about what kinds of investments in the built environment can optimize opportunities for youth health.

## **Ideas for further analysis**

The focus groups provided a rich body of data that merits further analysis. It includes valuable insights to compare to other data collected from the school studies of youth and their families.

The research group working with the decision maker focus group data anticipates the potential to develop several research papers. We have identified five paper topics (with lead author identified) to produce over the next many months.

- *Barriers and challenges participants identify to implementing a youth health agenda in decisions about the built environment.* This paper will consider problems of coordinating the policies and practices of different government departments and levels. (lead: Tara McHugh)
- *Approaches to dealing with youth in the built environment.* This paper will discuss the way in which participants talked about youth, acted on behalf of youth, and sought to engage youth in policy and decision making activities around the built environment. (Lead: Patricia Manuel)
- *Stories of practice.* This paper will review discursive strategies participants used in discussions, with special interest in the personal stories and anecdotes used to make points. (Lead: Jill Grant)
- *Understanding the system.* This paper will examine how participants talked about the roles and responsibilities of government, and their own roles and responsibilities as professionals working within the system. (Lead: Jill Grant)
- *Youth health: what planners can do.* The paper will target the audience of professional planners to bring the issues related to the research to their attention and to disseminate the results of the study. It would be targeted at the professional journal of planners in Canada. (Lead: Kate MacKay)

## **APPENDIX 1: Discussion Guides**

### **Decision makers focus group component study: question guide**

What type and level of involvement does your department (agency, organization) have in making decisions about the built environment and its use?

What type and level of involvement does your department (agency, organization) have in engaging youth in healthy living?

How do health concerns currently influence decisions within your agency regarding the built environment (or the use of the built environment)?

What is the receptiveness among policy and decision makers in your agency for incorporating health considerations into decision making?

What type and level of communication do you have with other agencies regarding youth programming connected to healthy living?

What type and level of communication do you have with other agencies regarding the form and/or use of the built environment?

What do you (on behalf of your agency) think is the most significant thing you can do within the mandate of your agency to foster a built environment that supports healthy living especially one that supports healthy life style choices among youth?

What do you (on behalf of your agency) think is the most significant barrier faced to fostering a built environment that supports healthy living, especially among youth?

### **Guide for planners' workshop: discussion group questions**

What is your (or your agency's) role in creating physical or built environments that support healthy living, especially among youth?

In what ways do the physical (built) environments of your jurisdiction (municipality, province) support healthy living? In what ways do they undermine healthy living?

What policies or programs available to you (and your jurisdiction) help communities choose to invest in health-supporting improvements to the built environment?

What are the biggest changes needed in your jurisdiction to facilitate these environments?

What challenges do you (or your agency) face in trying to implement changes such as these?

*(If not covered by answers to the above questions)*

What kind of policy, regulatory, or administrative changes in your jurisdiction would make it easier to build communities that support healthy living, especially for youth?

What tools and resources would be helpful to local decision makers in facilitating a built environment that supports healthy living?

What initiatives should planners take to promote better decision making about investments in the built environment?

**Resources:**

Presentation on the Physical Activity among Children and Youth in Nova Scotia. Health Promotion and Protection, Nova Scotia.

[http://www.gov.ns.ca/hpp/publications/PACY\\_2005\\_presentation.pdf](http://www.gov.ns.ca/hpp/publications/PACY_2005_presentation.pdf)

Active Kids, Healthy Kids.

<http://www.gov.ns.ca/hpp/pasr/akhk-research.asp>

Environment, Nutrition and Activity Project: Optimizing investments in the built environment to reduce youth obesity

<http://www.ahprc.dal.ca/projects/ENACT.htm>

Active and safe routes to school, Nova Scotia

<http://saferoutesns.ca/>

CBC report on youth obesity

<http://www.cbc.ca/health/story/2005/04/20/obesity-children050420.html>

Star report on youth obesity

<http://www.thestar.com/News/article/196781>

Health and the built environment: examples

<http://www.preventioninstitute.org/builtenv.html>

Health and the built environment: a literature review

<http://www.ohcc-ccso.ca/en/linking-health-and-the-built-environment-a-literature-review>