



Photos- Fort McMurray Workshop, March 30th, 2009



Presentation by Fort McMurray Planning Staff

Fort McMurray has a good transit system. Buses equipped with bike racks.

Sustainable
Alberta Association
Complete Streets



No sidewalks on many downtown streets force people to walk on busy streets. Note the garbage and lack of drainage. Heaps of old snow and garbage were a problem on pedestrian routes and public spaces throughout the town centre. Court house is at the end of the street.



James participates in mapping activity. He is part of a growing African immigrant population in Fort McMurray.



What is the Sustainable Alberta Association?

Sustainable Alberta Association (SAA) is a Calgary-based, non-profit organization encouraging Canadians to reduce their car use. SAA's goal is to promote sustainable commuting, for better health and a cleaner environment. We have evolved over the years from a grass roots organization to assisting in administering the now national Commuter Challenge. SAA also delivers year-round workplace trip reduction programs, as well as sustainable transportation workshops to workplaces, communities and institutions.

The UTSP sponsored workshops were delivered by the Sustainable Alberta Association's Sustainable Transportation Advisor, Rebecca O'Brien, and Executive Director, Kathryn Winkler. The workshops are aimed at community leaders: political leaders, municipal staff, health-care professionals, and invited members of the public, especially those who have demonstrated an interest in health, environment and planning issues related to transportation including representatives from youth, senior, and disability sectors. The key to the workshops is to be able to deliver models of similar contexts to the community, so that we draw on positive initiatives taken in northern Canadian and American municipalities



The Wood Buffalo (Fort McMurray) workshop provides residents, community leaders, and municipal staff an opportunity to:

1. Become familiar with the concept of Complete Street Design and its critical importance to public health and environmental well-being
2. Share information on Sustainable Alberta Association (SAA)'s successful social marketing strategies, including the Calgary Commuter Challenge event
3. Assess the current conditions for sustainable transportation and arrive at a common understanding of its strengths, weaknesses, and priorities
4. Learn best practices for the design of pedestrian, cycling and transit facilities and view examples from other Canadian communities with similar demographic and climate contexts;
5. Provide input on next steps for the improvement of walkability, bikeability and transit options.

Main Components of the Complete Streets workshop:

1. Presentations on Complete Streets
2. Local presentations
3. Walkabout and assessments
4. Group Mapping Activity and discussion
5. UTSP Case Study (“Whitehorse Moves” presented by Sabine Schweiger, Environmental Coordinator, City of Whitehorse)
6. Local TDM initiatives (in Fort McMurray, Amanda Owens - Envision Wood Buffalo, Rick Schippling - Regional Housing Strategy, Wendy Koo - Lower Townsite Area Redevelopment Plan)
7. Next steps

Complete Streets:

A Complete Street is safe, comfortable, and convenient for travel by automobile, foot, bicycle and transit. Complete Streets should be: designed, built, operated, and maintained taking in consideration the needs of all users (pedestrians, cyclists, transit users, car drivers, the disabled, seniors, and children). When designing and planning Complete Streets, the references for standards should be the more vulnerable street users; a ten year old on a bicycle, a person in a wheelchair, a senior citizen. This way, all people are included. Complete Streets require planners and engineers to design and implement policies with all users in mind. These streets are continuous and need to be part of all planning policy. In other words, one isolated block of Complete Street doesn't help much when it is surrounded by an ocean of incomplete design with no connectivity.



Why does Alberta need to do more in the area of sustainable transportation?

There is no avoiding the signs of construction throughout Alberta, and the fact that the province continues to undergo substantive demographic change. As Alberta's population expands, there will also be more people moving within, and to and from, the cities and towns. How do Alberta regional communities plan to accommodate this movement, without putting even more cars on the streets in their cities and towns? As gas prices continue to be unstable, and citizens choose to consider positive environmental and quality of life options, how will the province accommodate these choices? With safe, convenient and attractive choices aside from the automobile-Complete Streets- it may be possible to have one of the most liveable provinces in the country.

Over the past half century, streets in North America have been built to accommodate the 60% of the population that drives. Cities and towns in Alberta are prime examples of this, with the highest per capita vehicle ownership, the highest gas consumption and the most kilometres driven per car in the country (Source, Alberta Transportation). Regardless of the excellent trails systems in many communities, the reality is that the current built environment too often discourages healthy, sustainable transportation. With a few exceptions, engineers have been making incomplete streets for far too long, and they have done this because North Americans see it as a fundamental right to drive anywhere, anytime. The tide is changing, as many now recognise the negative impacts of this poorly built environment, from obesity, to pollution, to the costs of the car-both personal and social. In steadily increasing number of US States and municipalities, Complete Streets are now policy (see attached California Complete Streets Law). As Colin Farynowski (C.E.T., City of Grande Prairie) said during his presentation the Peace River workshop: "We need to recognise that the cost of building for the car is too high, and look at alternatives that will benefit the community. As pressures for fast development increase, do not make the same mistakes in considering only the car for transportation."

The workshop that SAA delivered through Transport Canada UTSP sponsorship in the towns of Peace River and Fort Murray focused on the concept of 'Complete Street' design. The purpose of the workshops was to provide decision-makers and citizens with an awareness of what it means to design Complete Streets. SAA workshops provide an overview of sustainable transportation and its economic, health and environmental benefits to the community, with a focus on an Albertan regional context. The workshops are designed to promote the improvement of health and environment by engaging communities in a process to evaluate whether their communities are designed for all users, and to improve their walking, cycling, transit and carpooling opportunities.



Fort McMurray Background:

Fort McMurray is located in the Wood Buffalo region of Northern Alberta, 435 kilometers (270 mi) northeast of Edmonton on Highway 63, about 60 kilometers (37 mi) west of the Saskatchewan border, nestled in the boreal forest at the confluence of the Athabasca River and the Clearwater River. Fort McMurray is the largest community in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo.. The population of the town is between 60,000 and 75, 000 (this number is open because of the number of employees based in the camps that are dependent on the Alberta oil and gas industry most of whom are part of a large transient population). The population of Fort McMurray was 64,441 in 2006. It experienced a sustained annual average growth rate of 8.5 per cent between 1999 and 2006. Forecasts from the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo's Strategic Planning and Policy Division indicate that it will reach a population of 100,000 by 2012. (*1) Planners at the workshop forecast that by 2025 the population of Fort McMurray will be at 250,000 K. As a result of this growth, it faces extremely complex challenges in terms of land use and transportation planning.

The population of Fort McMurray has soared over the past decade due to the economic opportunities offered by the oilsands development. Infrastructure has struggled to keep up with this growth, and to further this, much of this growth is based on transient workers whose primary goal is to make money and return home with these earnings. Whatever massive profits the large oil companies are making are not seen in the lower townsite. Additionally there is a disproportionate number of men (between the ages of 20 and 40) in the community, especially in the lower town site area. There are also challenges with homelessness, alcohol, drug abuse and crime. The town centre was not identified by workshop participants as a place of pride where public spaces are well used. Participants identified that walkability could be improved considerably with better sidewalks (including maintenance), intersections, places to go (cafes), landscaping, overall improved aesthetics, a removal of some of the hotspots that attract a crowd that participants felt was not reflective of the general population. Public, attractive, safe spaces were seen to be lacking. Many long time residents expressed (anecdotally) their frustration with this, and the fact that the tax base is not Fort McMurray but the communities that the transient work force come from. Workshop participants identified the main asset of the community to be the community itself. The transit system, parks, and geography were also identified as positive components of the community. Strong mayoral leadership and interest in sustainable community growth were articulated by participants as strengths. A growing immigrant population contributes to a diverse and potentially dynamic community.

Workshop Activities

Participants were given one of four icons for Complete Street design: a ten year old on a bicycle, a person in a wheelchair, a senior citizen, or a driver. Shannon (Safe Communities Wood Buffalo), brought a stroller so that participants could take turns pushing it along the sidewalk. During the walkabout participants were asked to look at the transportation infrastructure and ask themselves how those residents are expected to access the services in the neighbourhood by foot, bike or transit.



With the concepts presented in the Complete Street presentation (wide sidewalks with trees, green space and parking as a buffer between pedestrians and traffic; bikeways that are physically separated from the road system; sidewalks that are maintained all throughout the seasons, transit stops that are comfortable, safe, convenient and attractive, intersection design that puts priority on the safety of pedestrians and cyclists instead of the speedy flow of cars and trucks...). Participants were given a

“Complete Streets Calculator” asked to assess the current barriers (speeding cars and traffic congestion, unsafe, unpleasant -and sometimes just anaesthetic conditions) and potential for improvement. Furthermore, they were able to consider the loss of dignity a wheelchair user or senior citizen must suffer just to find a safe place to access the sidewalk or cross the road.

After the walkabout, participants returned to the conference room and were engaged in a mapping exercise. Using an idea that the SAA team had picked up at a charrette training workshop, SAA hired a technologist from Tsix (tsix.ca), a Calgary-based urban design team, to draw detailed maps of several downtown Peace River and Fort McMurray streets and intersections that were then visited in the walkabouts. Participants were given a toolbox (drawn from the Complete Streets presentation and WalkableCommunities.org resources) and asked to use the toolbox as they drew their own ideas for improvements on the maps. This generated a lot of discussion, and was a great application of the Complete Streets tools that had been provided. It allowed participants in the group to bounce ideas back and forth from an engineering, planning, and health perspective.

Two case studies, one from the City of Whitehorse’s UTSP “Whitehorse Moves”, presented by Sabine Schweiger, and the second from Grande Prairie’s Transportation Engineer, Colin Farynowski, were presented in the afternoon in Peace River. A number of participants identified these case studies as the highlight of the day, as it provided the participants with a model of what steps Northern Canadian Communities are taking to address sustainable transportation, and subsequently what was possible for Peace River. Colin Farynowski’s presentation was particularly rewarding to hear. Grande Prairie had a Complete Streets workshop delivered by SAA in the Spring of 2008, and Colin Farynowski credited two recent ACT Canada TDM Conferences as well as the SAA workshop for influencing Grande Prairie’s transportation Master Plans, which now prioritise pedestrian, cycling, and transit design.

Finally, SAA presents ideas on Next Steps for Peace River and Fort McMurray. These include:

- Using municipal sustainability policy to identify goals (healthier population, sustainable environment)
- Identifying challenges, start small
- Looking to communities with similar barriers, how these were overcome, lessons learned (such as the community of Okotoks has done with provincially-owned roads)



- ⦿ Connecting all stakeholders, devise a plan in collaboration with professionals and public through the charrette process
- ⦿ Applying for municipal, provincial and federal funding that supports AT and transit

SAA would like to thank Transport Canada, the Town of Peace River, The City of Grande Prairie, Safe Communities Wood Buffalo, and the City of Whitehorse for supporting this workshop. SAA would like to thank the participants at the workshop in Peace River and Fort McMurray, many of whom were engaged, enthusiastic and open minded.

For more information on Complete Streets, go to www.completestreets.org or www.walkablecommunities.org. There are also some great examples on the Street Films website at www.streetfilms.org/archives/physically-separated-bike-lanes.

For a case study that is relevant to a northern Canadian community, go to Transport Canada's UTSP's "Whitehorse Moves" at www.tc.gc.ca/programs/environment/UTSP.

For further information on Sustainable Alberta Association, go to www.calgarycommute.ca.

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*⁽¹⁾ <http://www.woodbuffalo.ab.ca/business/demographics/demographics.asp>