

SEEING GREEN:

Urban Green Space Reducing Mental Health Costs

Louise Hollingsworth

Investing in urban green space pays big dividends when it comes to the economic impact of managing the mental health of the community. With continuing downloading from provincial and

that was not treated by the health care system. Suicide accounts for 24 percent of all deaths among 15-24 year olds, and 16 percent among 25-44 year olds. In 1999, 3.8 percent of all

\$3.7 million. Local emergency shelter and street outreach providers indicate that well over half of the people they serve have mental health issues.²

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federal levels, managing mental health is becoming a growing burden on the municipality. Living in a modern urban setting can mean sensory deprivation and information overload. Green space saves tight budget dollars because it helps keep citizens sane and productive.

High Cost of Mental Illness

Health care costs are high in Canada. The cost of mental illnesses in Canada for just the health care system was estimated to be at least \$7.9 billion in 1998. An additional \$6.3 billion was spent on uninsured mental health services and time off work for depression and distress



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admissions in general hospitals (1.5 million hospital days) were due to anxiety disorders, bipolar disorders, schizophrenia, major depression, personality disorders, eating disorders, and suicidal behaviour.¹

Direct ways we in municipalities see the costs for mental health can range from homelessness to spousal abuse, from children's aid societies to property values.

A recent City of London submission to Ontario's Minister of Finance highlights the high mental health costs are causing to many municipalities. The report states "deinstitutionalization of mental health services has cost the London Police Service between \$1.5 and

Green Space Benefits

In a study conducted in a Chicago public housing development, women who lived in apartment buildings with trees and greenery immediately outside reported greater effectiveness and less procrastination in dealing with their major life issues than those living in barren but otherwise identical buildings. In addition, the women in greener surroundings found their

- 1 The Report on Mental Illness in Canada, October 2002. EBIC 1998 (Health Canada 2002), Stephens et al., 2001 <www.cmha.ca/bins/content_page.asp?cid=6-20-23-43>, Canadian Mental Health Association.
- 2 <www.london.ca/Mayor/srt_COL_budgetsubmission.pdf> City of London Submission to Minister of Finance, 2007, Ontario pre-budget consultation, January 23, 2007.

problems to be less difficult and of shorter duration.³

In another study, researchers examined the cognitive functions of children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) to determine the effect that the children's surroundings had on learning and their ability to concentrate. The researchers found that exposure to parks and other green spaces improved the children's ability to focus and concentrate.⁴

A third study demonstrated that hospital patients placed in rooms with windows facing trees heal faster and require shorter hospital stays. For people in nursing homes, even an hour outdoors

in contact with nature improves directed attention capacity. Powers of concentration increase for very elderly people after a visit to a garden, compared to after resting indoors in their favourite room. The more impaired an individual is, the greater is this effect.⁵

How can we explain this link between vegetation and better coping? It has been proposed that exposure to green surroundings refreshes the ability to concentrate, leading to greater effectiveness at coping with major life issues. Even small amounts of greenery – a few trees and a patch of grass – helped people to feel and do better.

The direct mental health benefits of green space on human beings have been summarized as follows:

- ▶ improved self-awareness, self-esteem, self-concept, and positively

3 Adding Trees Makes Life More Manageable, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign – Landscape and Human Health Laboratory, <www.lhhl.uiuc.edu/index.htm>.

4 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1600 Clifton Rd, Atlanta, GA 30333, U.S.A. <www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/healthtopics/mental.htm>.

5 Urban greenspace and mental health (Prepared for the UK MAB Urban Forum by Ian Douglas, September 2005) <<http://ukmaburbanforum.org.uk/Publications/UF%20Publications%20and%20Reports/ukmabgrnspcepap2.htm>>.

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"The significance of the colour green lies in its direct relationship with nature itself. Green signifies growth, renewal, health, life, and vitality, and directly represents the environment in which we live."

affected mood state;

- ▶ reduction in negative feelings, such as anger, fear, anxiety, and frustration;
- ▶ improved ability to recover from stressful episodes;
- ▶ effective alleviation of the symptoms of anxiety, depression, and psychosomatic illness (including irritability, insomnia, tension, headaches and indigestion);
- ▶ improved psychological health, especially emotional and cognitive aspects (including reduced symptoms of ADHD);
- ▶ restored capacity for concentration and attention.⁶

Power of Colour

Brenda Feenstra, with The International Association of Color Consultants North America, explains,

The significance of the colour green lies in its direct relationship with nature itself. Green signifies growth, renewal, health, life, and vitality, and directly represents the environment in which we live. In a city of cement, there is no relief without green spaces. Green is the most widely acceptable colour and is the easiest colour to physiologically process by the human eye. Its wavelength

enables the eye to make the least adjustments to read the colour. The required effort by the eye to read colours significantly increases with the size of colour wavelength. More effort required by the eye to read colours strains the eye, and it tires in the process, creating messages to the brain of mental and physical fa-

⁶ UK MAB Urban Forum, Urban greenspace and mental health, prepared for the UK MAB Urban Forum by Ian Douglas, September 2005, <<http://ukmaburbanforum.org.uk/Publications/UF%20Publications%20and%20Reports/ukmabgrmspcpap2.htm>>.



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tigue, frustration, irritability, and the decreased ability to cope.

Municipalities are charged with providing a wide range of infrastructure that supports what has been traditionally viewed as hard and soft services. Hard services were seen as vital for economic, health and safety reasons. Soft services tended to be the infrastructure for “discretionary” recreation facilities, libraries, homes for the aged, and green space. It has been difficult for municipalities to measure the impact of green space against failing infrastructure when making budget allocations. Fiscal constraints continue to be a key barrier to outright procurement of green space by municipalities.

In these tight financial times, official plans are the tools municipalities are using to create new green space within developments. A greater recognition of the importance of green space to the consumer is helping to drive the success of this approach. Developers, working with the urban planning teams, are producing admirable results that increase the developer’s property value while meeting the municipal goals for green space.

Add a Little Green

Exposure to green surroundings reduces mental fatigue and the feelings of irritability that can come with it. The ability to concentrate is refreshed by green views, along with the ability and willingness to deal with problems thoughtfully and less aggressively. These outcomes are desired in the community building process – especially in dense urban settings, where one individual can impact so many others. Research shows that by adding even a little natural green, people take better care of themselves and each other.

Investing in green space provides a good return to municipalities that are carrying increasing costs for mental health. By playing a significant role in balancing sensory inputs and maintaining our productivity, green space saves the municipality going to, and coming from the bank. MW

Stepping Up to the Climate Change Challenge

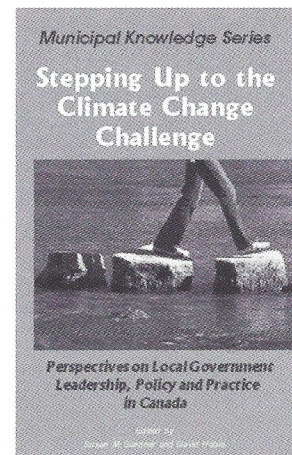
*Perspectives on
Local Government Leadership,
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Edited by Susan M. Gardner and David Noble

Once upon a time, not so long ago, there was a lively debate about climate change. Was it really happening? Were humans really causing it? If the wheels of global climate change were in motion, could we really influence the extent of change and its effects?

We now know that the climate change challenge is real – and there are important steps municipalities can and should be taking to successfully engage on the issue. This book highlights the important role for Canada’s local governments in contributing to climate change solutions, locally and globally.

With powerful examples from Canadian municipalities that are already leading the way, *Stepping Up* also highlights the theory, tools and strategies that local governments can put into practice immediately to begin mitigating climate change and better prepare their communities to adapt to the changes already evident.



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