

WRALN Stakeholder Engagement Process

A Review of the:
Waterloo Region Active Living Charter & Framework for Action

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1. Executive Summary

The Waterloo Region Active Living Network (WRALN) consists of representatives from various sectors: government, public health, non-profit (local and provincial), private, education, community groups /grass roots, and individuals. The network envisions “a vibrant Waterloo Region where all residents are engaged in active living”. To further their vision, WRALN developed a **Waterloo Region Active Living Charter** and a **Framework for Action** to guide future policy work.

1.1 Current Environment

Within Waterloo Region there are already a number of policy initiatives at Regional and Municipal levels related to active transportation and active living. Some examples include: the Regional Transportation Master Plan (with *Walk Cycle Waterloo Region* as one aspect of the plan), the Active & Safe Routes to School initiative; the WRDSB’s *Active Transportation Charter*¹; and the *Healthy Kids Community Challenge* that will be launched in 2015. Additionally, every township and municipality in the region has a specific mandate for active living (recreation and leisure). This landscape makes for a supportive but also a complex context within which to position the *Waterloo Region Active Living Charter*.

1.2 Stakeholder Engagement Process

The Network wished to expand the community’s involvement in this policy work and hired a consultant to carry out a consultation with key community stakeholders to:

- Obtain input on the draft Waterloo Region Active Living Charter (WRALC) and the Framework for Action (FA) documents;
- Explore potential policy actions; and
- Propose recommendations to WRALN on next steps to achieve endorsement and approval of the WRALC by regional government.

¹ http://www.wrdsb.ca/planning/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/Active-Transportation-Charter_WRDSB-only.pdf

1.3 Methodology

A stakeholder engagement process and protocol was created in partnership with a small advisory group representing WRALN. Eight focus groups were consulted (for a total of 71 participants) and 5 Key informants (representing a mix of planners, a funder and a children's advocate). The eight focus groups included a range of advisory volunteer committees, a neighbourhood network, a large recreational organization, and a private sector group:

- Safe and Healthy Community Advisory Committee, City of Waterloo
- Safe and Healthy Community Advisory Committee, City of Kitchener
- Active and Safe Routes to School Advisory Committee
- Grand River Accessibility Advisory Committee
- Waterloo Region Mental Health Work Group
- Cambridge Neighbourhood Organization
- YMCA of Cambridge and Kitchener Waterloo, Leadership Team
- For-Profit Focus Group

1.4 The Findings

Most of the participants appreciated the intent and the comprehensive focus of the Active Living Charter. Everyone understood the need for an increased awareness of, and participation in, an active lifestyle. In terms of safe and healthy communities, and investments in health, it seems like a natural fit with the thinking and actions of many of the interviewees.

There were a number of questions, however, regarding the intended audience, the scope of the ideas presented, and whether a Charter is an effective tool for change at the Municipal and Regional levels. There was concern about the clarity of the Charter and its lack of appeal to the general public. Some of the principles or goals seemed too lofty (such as targeting poverty) and they undermined the Charter's potential to be meaningful for everyday living. There was also some concern about redundancy, given the other existing charters such as the "*Charter of Physical Activity, Sport, Recreation, Play and Well-Being for all Citizens in Cambridge, Ontario, Canada*". Ultimately, respondents were not completely convinced that there is a need for another Charter. Participants did want to see a revised edition of the Charter but most people were not ready to endorse what was presented for discussion. The following quote is an example of what was heard,

“I see the point to it, (but) for me and for us to do our job, we don’t need this anymore. We have so many policies and charters that we quote every time we bring reports to council.”

The *Framework for Action* was better received due to the action items identified for each sector. The Framework prompted a number of groups to note the importance of a coordinated and integrated strategy to achieve a larger impact. The role of Public Health in facilitating this integrated strategy was mentioned a few times. Presented together, respondents could see how the Charter and Framework could be inter-woven to emphasize that everyone has a role to play.

1.5 Next Steps

Don’t Miss This Moment!

A couple of people stressed that now is the time to plant the seeds for future policy work as the Municipalities, Townships and the Region are engaged in creating their Strategic Plans for the next 4 years.

Create Tighter Linkages Between The Charter And The Framework

There is a readiness for a more coordinated response across the jurisdictions involved with active living. Participants suggested the Charter should be more engaging and the Framework should be “*A Call to Action*”.

Clarify The Role Of The Region Of Waterloo Public Health

A number of respondents noted that Public Health had a very clear role to play, not as a driver, but as an enabler, and this should be visible in the Framework’s list of sectors. (Note: The research that has been conducted on “Collective Impact”² describes the importance of a *backbone* organization in collaborative initiatives.)

Share The Next Version Of The Charter & Framework With Focus Groups

Every group wanted to see the next iteration of the Charter and Framework. Some of the organizations and networks would still like to consider endorsing the final product.

² SSIR, Winter 2011. http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/collective_impact

2. The Feedback – Key Themes

The participants in this stakeholder engagement process provided a mixed response to the *Waterloo Region Active Living Charter*. The majority of respondents were pleased with the corresponding *Framework for Action* which demonstrates that every sector has a specific and complimentary role to play. Some respondents felt that the Framework should be re-named, *A Call to Action* and be better integrated with the Charter to highlight the goal of unified and collective actions.

The framework is valuable because it makes links across sectors, across the continuum of times and places when people should be active

Positive feedback on the Charter emphasized its over-arching themes; the connection with current policies supporting trails, parks and transportation systems; and the fit with neighbourhood strategies. In general, the principles in the Charter were easy to support and it provided a common language to describe what was already happening across different sectors and programs. Some saw the Charter as a useful *“leverage point to start having more conversations”* with municipal councils and school boards.

A Charter is a good thing. People in Waterloo are not aware of how poorly we’re doing locally. A Charter provides focus and direction.

“The Charter has overarching themes that work as a unifier”.

However, despite the positive responses, there was also a great deal of skepticism about the need for another charter and the ability to accomplish substantive change through the endorsement of a charter.

“Everyone can get behind the idea of the Charter, but there’s the pragmatic consideration. So what? What are we doing with the Charter? The value comes in leverage...If there’s no teeth to this, it’s just good ideas we all agree with”.

Furthermore, respondents had a number of additional comments or ideas regarding the Charter’s principles and action points. The following themes and questions emerged from the discussions with the focus groups and key informants.

2.1 Why Do We Need Another Charter?

The majority of the respondents (key informants and focus group members) questioned the merits of creating and endorsing another Charter. People expressed concerns about this Charter's redundancy, given the other charters and initiatives that were already in place across the Region (for example, the Pedestrian Charter or the Charter of Physical Activity for the City of Cambridge). The following comments capture this sentiment.

"... We already have a lot of strong policy in place. Our challenge comes with making the rubber hit the road. Creating something that actually then gets done. Our cycling master plan has some really strong policy statements. That gives us our basis."

"There are a lot of other initiatives and policies in place already; (I'm) not sure what the charter is going to help with at this point. We quote the pedestrian charter in every report we have."

"Why do we need a Charter? Why do we need a unifying umbrella? Why is this better than what is already happening?"

2.2 What Will Be The Impact?

The question of whether charters are effective vehicles for creating change was raised in every focus group and by several of the key informants. Many people asked the "so what" question. The following sample of comments from respondents shows that, in their view, charters:

- Are just words or a paper exercise that does not translate into action and accountabilities;
- Have very little leverage and tend to sit in a drawer;
- Need to be seen as just the *first step of a very clearly defined plan*; and
- Are helpful to reference in the preamble of a report but after that serve little purpose.

"The value of the Charter is to get an agreement for those of us who are working together collectively...but a Charter as a tool to engage people or craft change, not so sure."

"A charter is just words on a paper unless people use it and know it exists"

“Often, when charters are created, there is lots of support for its content and intent, but it tends to stop there. Action doesn’t always follow. There would need to be something to ‘get legs underneath it’. What’s the end purpose? If it’s endorsed by council, what will that mean?”

Will the Charter be presented along with a policy or a funding structure? Unless it does, it will not have an impact at the citizen level. Without these, it is just a list of ideas that we all agree are good. It won’t impact any change that will have an effect on people’s lives.

“...Whereas something practical, like policies and by-laws with accountability would be more effective at getting people active. Put money on making sidewalks people can actually use, not on making a piece of paper to tell people to be active.”

2.3 Who Is The Audience?

Stakeholders indicated that it was unclear whether the Charter was intended to be written for the general public, other members of WRALN, politicians, or Waterloo Region as a whole. They noted the Charter needs to have:

- Clear Language that is simple and appealing (*“Need gems to speak to the audience”*);
- Practical and engaging action ideas for individual citizens rather than broad statements;
- Less detail (keep the details in the Framework) and a more tailored and compelling message for Waterloo Region and local organizations;
- More emphasis on children and youth; and
- Short snappy messages that the general public could rally behind.

2.4 Is The Scope Feasible?

A few of the stakeholders questioned the scope of the Charter and whether the goals were realistic. There was a concern with *motherhood and apple pie* statements that are *wildly aspirational*. No one could disagree with them but *“how we will know when we have made a difference”*?

People were particularly focused on the statements captured under the *“Invest in Health”* Principle. They noted that targeting the root causes of poor health, such as poverty, is a complex issue and not a readily achievable goal. As one person

said, *“The scope is gigantic, which makes it difficult to act on the Charter.”* They suggested more reasonable and specific goals leading to tangible action steps.

“Without these, it is just a list of ideas that we all agree are good. It won’t impact any change that will have an effect on people’s lives.”

2.5 How Do We Promote Inclusion And Equity?

Many of the focus groups paid attention to the *Inclusion and Equity* principle. They appreciated seeing it highlighted in the Charter and had a number of comments and additional ideas:

- New Canadians arrive in Canada healthier than they are 4 or 5 years later. Key barriers to physical activity and health include: the costs of recreational programming and rental fees; cultural barriers in terms of inclusive and safe spaces; and language barriers. The gym is an unknown concept to some and also raises gender issues (men-only or women-only gyms). Other issues include the accessibility of healthy and affordable food, mental health issues, and the many other priorities that take attention away from recreation.
- Low income residents walk out of necessity to the food bank or to work or to their children’s schools. In this case, individual needs must be met first; recreation for pleasure is not an option.
- *“Move more, sit less”* is offensive to someone confined to a wheelchair or scooter.
- There is a need for accessible pathways and broad sidewalks year-round. The use of wheelchairs, strollers and walkers requires sidewalks that are shoveled in the winter, kept free of tree branches or other debris, and available on both sides of the street, even during periods of construction.
- Getting to a location in an active way requires accessible washrooms at the end of the route.

“In the point on inclusion, it doesn't talk about finding out what people actually want to do in terms of physical activity. People need to be engaged in creating their own healthy options. ”

“As part of our focus on inclusion and equity, we interviewed quite a few groups that run sports teams. The biggest issue and challenge that they faced was the matter of space and accessibility of gyms and playgrounds... They could not afford it.”

“We are working to make programming (more) inclusive of families and people with special needs, and taking programming out to the community. We need to bring things to people, not just expect people to come to us.”

“People would be more active if we had more abilities to be active, rather than people sitting and talking about being more active. ...Money should be spent on things to make places more accessible to methods that are active.”

2.6 How Do We Make It Easy For Everyone To Be As Active As Possible?

People responded positively to the *Design and Planning for Movement* principle. They noted the importance of a built environment that motivates people to walk or bike because it is a more enjoyable choice and easier than driving.

“I was happy to see walkability and roads included. In my neighbourhood, children walk to and from school about 2 kilometers and they cross 5 lanes of traffic. I just think that was not well thought out and planned. I was happy to see walkability of roads addressed.”

Respondents had some additional, easy-to-implement ideas:

- When booking meetings, consider whether the location is walkable or has public transportation.
- If a meeting is over 2 hours long, build in a stretch break thus making it normal to be active.
- Appreciate physical activity as an important element of community capacity building and start neighbourhood run clubs or ball hockey games for all ages. Create something close to home for people with busy lifestyles and encourage neighbours to support each other to be more active.

GARY'S STORY

One participant shared a story of a neighbour who had leukemia. During his treatments he continued to walk his dogs (and sometimes a cat) around the neighbourhood. As he became increasingly ill, he could no longer make it all the way around his route. His neighbours put chairs along the sidewalk with signs that said, “*Gary's Chair*”, so he could take breaks and socialize during his walks.

2.7 How Can We Do A Better Job Of Engaging Children And Youth?

Everyone wanted to focus on how to re-engage children and youth in being physically active through unstructured play and activity. They liked the Charter's emphasis on trails, parks and greenspaces. They talked about tobogganing, skating, running, and the ability to just roam outdoors through neighbourhood activities and family fun.

In the past, unstructured, active play was the norm and we have since moved away from that for many reasons. Now we're seeing fewer parks, but larger parks. Neighbourhood Associations are doing programming, but just getting outside and playing and getting to know neighbours has been limited.

People stressed the importance of children being able to take risks and experience the thrill of outdoor play. They noted that the plasticized playgrounds of the last 2 decades are shifting back to more natural playgrounds, like the ones designed by Evergreen³. These naturalized playgrounds can become an essential component of the school's outdoor curriculum. One key Informant cited a study indicating that if children aren't given opportunities to learn their own capacity for risk at an early age, then they won't understand their risk tolerance as teenagers.

"Adults who guide recreation of children need to be more comfortable with letting kids tumble and fall. In our culture, we emphasize preventing injuries."

Respondents believed that there are many factors working against children to prevent active outdoor play and learning:

- A risk adverse society prevents children from participating in free unstructured play.
- Municipal policies and by-laws focus on reducing liability resulting in the banning of tobogganing and outdoor skating on City properties. Common sense needs to prevail - the City needs to make sure the property is safe and the individual needs to be responsible for assessing individual safety.
- Kids aren't walking to school in walkable neighbourhoods because of a number of factors including: convenience and the time it takes for working parents to walk to school and back; a school's risk aversion to unstructured play in non- school hours; and safety issues with regards to vehicular traffic on nearby municipal streets.

³ See: <http://www.evergreen.ca/our-impact/children/> and <http://www.evergreen.ca/our-impact/children/greening-school-grounds/> and <http://yle.fi/uutiset/finnish-kindergarten-gets-kids-moving-with-outdoor-programme/7794088>

- Afterschool programs need to be within walking distance.
- Children today are lacking physical competence and confidence.

“The last thing you want is that at Grade 6, a child is learning for the first time that it’s fun to play outside. It’s easier to create habits earlier on in life.”

Given the support for unstructured play, there were mixed reactions to the Charter’s endorsement of more education and awareness and specifically the promotion of physical activity skill development in children. A couple of respondents were fully in favour of educating children to develop physical competence because:

- Skill development for children is important. In their youth, kids aren’t developing the physical skills anymore.
- Gym class isn’t meeting the need anymore because it’s not frequent enough, the activities in gym don’t teach those basic skills.

On the other hand, a children’s advocate notes that many children are uncomfortable in organized sports and sums up her aversion to skill development with this statement:

“I feel that every time I see something promoting active living, it is severely missing elements of creativity and fun. Words like "skill development" make me cringe and have nightmarish flashbacks to running laps and doing field hockey drills in Grade 9. Nothing made me resent and avoid physical activity more than that. There needs to be more out-of-the box thinking. For example, in community design, building interactive art exhibits that double as play structures throughout the community is one way to get kids more active in daily life”

Ideally, people would like to see more family interaction with such things as bike friendly roads on the weekends, family runs, fun workouts, tobogganing and skating. Safety will always be an important consideration but this can be balanced with the need for play.

3. The Way Forward

Some very clear suggestions regarding next steps emerged from these discussions.

3.1 Don't Miss This Moment!

A couple of people stressed that now is the time to plant the seeds for future policy work as the Municipalities, Townships and the Region are engaged in creating their Strategic Plans for the next 4 years. Rather than waiting to work through a process of community and municipal endorsements, a couple of key informants strongly recommended that WRALN act immediately.

The Charter is a missed opportunity in terms of the “ask”. How does a councilor make the connection to a strategic plan? Once approved, then what? And so what?

It's timely – each Council is setting their strategic plans...Create the readiness now. Make comments about the priorities. Put the key messages in a letter and send out to members. Have a “Strat Chat” at the Regional level. There needs to be a clear ask, “As a first step, in the next 5 years...”

3.2 Create Tighter Linkages Between The Charter And The Framework

Respondents commented that there's a readiness for a coordinated response across the jurisdictions involved with active living. It's time for organizations and government to stop working in a compartmentalized way and to become more accountable to common goals. They suggested that the two documents could be woven together in a streamlined fashion. For example, the Charter could quickly list who the players need to be, but their roles should only be explained in the Framework.

The integrative nature of the Charter is positive. There are a lot of one-offs being done in the region, so being able to pull it all together in an integrated way is a good thing.

“Integrative to me is also about coordinating pressure points and opportunity points. The challenge is to raise things up on the attention screen. How do we make this whole movement one of the top 3-5 top things?”

3.3 Clarify The Role Of The Region Of Waterloo Public Health

A couple of the groups questioned Public Health's role in the Charter and Framework. The involvement of Public Health was implied but not explicit. People felt that Public Health had a very clear role to play, not as a driver, but as an enabler, and this should be visible in the Framework.

"I always found that Public Health's one great forte is that you network across all sectors and all agencies all the time. That's something municipalities don't do. The charter might be a great eye opener, and it might legitimize and reinforce public health's role in all of this, in terms of who the charter reaches and who needs to be involved."

Author's Note

In the last few years, the concept of "**collective impact**" has caught the attention of many local and national organizations (such as Tamarack). Since the original article by John Kania and Mark Kramer appeared in the Stanford Social Innovation Review⁴, the thinking about how we achieve substantive change in social programs has been disrupted and challenged. In the original article, the authors note that old model of funding tends to look at **isolated impact**.

In short, the non-profit sector most frequently operates using an approach that we call isolated impact. It is an approach oriented toward finding and funding a solution embodied within a single organization, combined with the hope that the most effective organizations will grow or replicate to extend their impact more widely.

Alternatively, a collective impact approach is proving to be successful in creating lasting change because of five factors:

- A common agenda and definition of the problem that is shared by multiple participants;
- Shared measurement systems;
- Mutually reinforcing activities;
- Continuous communication; and
- Backbone support from one organization to coordinate and manage the entire initiative.

⁴ SSIR, Winter 2011. http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/collective_impact

Much has been discussed and written since this article first appeared, including articles on the concept of backbone support.⁵ The researchers have found that during the lifecycle of an initiative, backbone organizations:

- Guide vision and strategy
- Support aligned activities
- Establish shared measurement practices
- Build public will
- Advance policy
- Mobilize funding

The collective impact ideas and organizing principles would seem to align with the work of WRALN and the support provided to the network by Waterloo Region Public Health.

3.4 Share The Next Version Of The Charter & Framework With Focus Groups

Every group wanted to see the next iteration of the Charter and Framework. Some of the organizations and networks would still like to consider endorsing the final product.

Next Steps - Effort/Impact Analysis

<p>Easy to do and yields a big improvement (Go for it! Low hanging fruit)</p> <p>Revise the Charter to one page and use it with the Framework as speaking notes to hold conversations now with staff involved in municipal and regional strategic planning. Highlight the issues which could be considered in the next strategic plans.</p>	<p>Easy to do but yields a small improvement (Go for it but don't invest as much time)</p> <p>Revise the Charter to be much more engaging and easy to read and send it back out to stakeholders with an invitation to share it widely.</p>
<p>Difficult to do but yields a big improvement. (Start the planning & first steps)</p> <p>Continue to engage the different sectors in an integrated "Collective Impact" approach to active living</p>	<p>Difficult to do and yields a small improvement. (Avoid!)</p> <p>Obtaining full endorsement of the Active Living Charter from citizens, sectors and councils</p>

(Adapted from Ingrid Bens)

⁵http://www.ssireview.org/blog/entry/understanding_the_value_of_backbone_organizations_in_collective_impact_1

Appendix

A **Movement to Move** for Waterloo Region

Vision: *A vibrant and healthy Waterloo Region where all citizens are engaged in active living*

The *Waterloo Region Active Living Network* believes in encouraging physical activity, active play, and all types of movement throughout the day. We know that this will contribute to better physical and mental health, prevent chronic disease, and enhance social connections and quality of life. Our vision includes the promotion of movement (any movement!) at every opportunity through: 1) the design and planning of neighborhoods, workplaces, and public spaces; and 2) the engagement of children, adults, and families in active living to support their full potential for learning, working, and playing.

Everyone has a role to play!

To achieve this vision, we call for all levels of government, educational institutions, neighborhood associations, civic groups, and individual citizens to work collaboratively to reach this shared goal through these principles.

1. Commit to Getting Everyone Moving

- Let's incorporate movement in all aspects of our lives, including: work, active modes of transportation, daily life, school, and leisure time

2. Make it easy to be active

- Bring back play! (In parks, on trails, in naturalized playgrounds and greenspaces)
- Promote the options for physical activity such as neighbourhood fun runs, ball hockey challenges, gardening, walking or cycling to work, climbing stairs, or *walking meetings*.
- Increase the physical competence and confidence of children to ensure that they have the capacity to be active throughout their lives

3. Be Inclusive

- Support free and low-cost options for active living such as accessible public spaces for play, hiking or walking trails, as well as accessible organized recreation, programming and washrooms.
- Ensure a variety of opportunities exist that allow all individuals to easily participate in active living without barriers.

4. Design and Plan for Movement (at all levels of government)

- Design, plan and invest in neighborhoods, public spaces, greenspaces, parks, roads and communities which encourage active living through walking, cycling, running, skating, playing...