



St. Paul:

Sharing Local Knowledge through Pictures and Stories



COMMUNITY HEALTH &
THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

The Project

This project helped researchers understand how residents of St. Paul saw their community's built environment. This project looked at features in St. Paul that helped or prevented people from being physically active and eating healthy food. The **built environment** includes features in the community like:

- parks and green spaces,
- residential areas,
- public transit,
- indoor and outdoor activity options,
- restaurants and grocery stores options,
- how a community is maintained, and
- how the roads and sidewalks are designed.

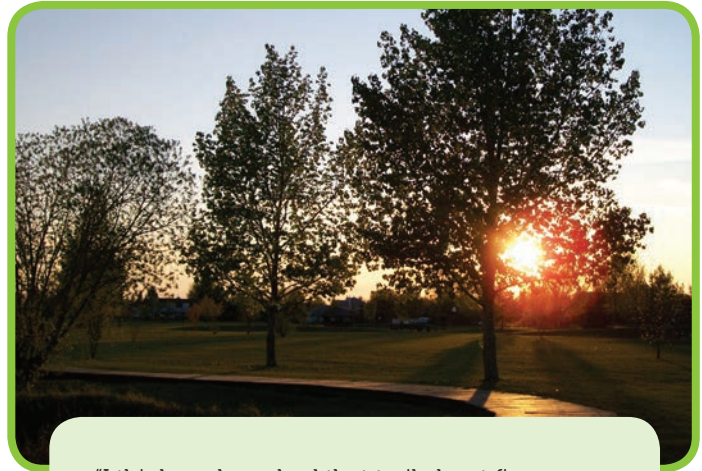
These types of features may also affect the community's **social atmosphere**. The social atmosphere may include a community that feels friendly or having a good neighbour. Together, built and social features may influence the health of residents and the decisions these residents make regarding health.

This project is part of a larger project at the University of Alberta called **Community**

Health and the Built Environment. The goal of the larger project is to understand how people's decisions to make healthy choices are partly shaped by features of the community where they live. The project is taking place in four communities throughout Alberta: Bonnyville, North Central Edmonton, Medicine Hat/Redcliff and St. Paul.

Pictures are Worth a Thousand Words!

How did the researchers do this project? They asked residents to take photos of their community. The residents then told researchers why those photos helped to describe physical activity and healthy eating in their community. This kind of project is called **photovoice**. Photovoice is a commonly used research method that helps researchers to gain a local perspective about an identified issue. Photos can engage people better than words alone. Photovoice is a good way to begin conversations with local residents about their community.



"I think we have had that trail about five years and I have used it a lot for biking, rollerblading, and running because it goes all way around town. Its 11 km all together; so you can start here and the trail keeps going, so it's a nice place for walking. And as much as the lake is not really very nice the other scenery is nice, like here, there is lots of trees and there is benches to stop and just relax. I always think it is nice to go down there" (St. Paul resident).

The Photo-takers

Ten people participated in the project from the St. Paul community. The photo-takers generally represented the community population. Photo-takers were recruited through posters, e-mail and word-of-mouth by other community members. Photo-takers included men, women, and teenagers ranging in ages from 14 to 65+ and represented household incomes levels from under \$25,000 to over \$100,000 per year. The photo-takers had lived in the community from 11 to 65+ years, with most of them reporting that they had lived in St. Paul all their lives. Researchers tried to ensure that all residents of St. Paul had the chance to be a part of the project. Despite this, the group of photo-takers interviewed represented only a small range of community residents.



"This picture says 'Coming Soon Tim Hortons'. It just doesn't seem like a fat free friendly place with all the donuts and what not. There aren't that many healthy choices there. I think one disadvantage that comes with Tim Hortons opening in the community, is that it will be competition for the local bakery, which sells coffee and other drinks along with snacks and treats" (St. Paul resident).

The Photo-takers' Journey

1. Each of the photo-takers met with the researcher one-on-one to talk about their community.
2. The photo-takers were provided with digital cameras and were shown how to use them.
3. The photo-takers were given two weeks to take pictures. The pictures helped them talk about opportunities and barriers to physical activity and healthy eating in their community.
4. The pictures were printed.
5. Each of the photo-takers met one-on-one with the researcher a second time. During this time, the photo-takers told their stories about each picture.



"I took this picture because it represents the many little playgrounds that St Paul has. These parks all similar, well taken care of, and well utilized. I think it is important to have these little parks/playgrounds for children to play at. There are quite a few of these parks throughout the community so they are quite accessible" (St. Paul resident).

Bringing it All Together

After photo-takers shared their community stories, summaries were created for the top five pictures from every photo-taker. All of the photo-takers had the chance to review the summaries for their photos and provide input. These summaries were used (with permission from the photo-takers) to create a presentation and a report to share with community members and local decision-makers. Residents and researchers hope that the pictures and stories will help other community members gain insight into the St. Paul community. The stories and photos in this report are shared with permission from the photo-takers.

The Photo-takers' Stories

THE ST. PAUL COMMUNITY

St. Paul was generally viewed by the photo-takers as an agricultural service center for the surrounding region. Oil and gas industries were also identified as supporters of the local economy. Many photo-takers noted that the surrounding First Nation's communities contributed significantly to the economic service industries. The contributions of the First Nation's communities was evident through their purchases at local grocery stores, restaurants, and other retail outlets.

Most photo-takers identified St. Paul as a retirement center for the region. One photo-taker noted that the local decision-makers actively promoted St. Paul as a retirement community to the population outside of the region. As a result, the community has many features that appeal to both seniors and the retired population (see picture and caption above). The majority of photo-takers expressed a positive overall image of the community. They described St. Paul as a vibrant community. The community has a range of recreational facilities and activities, adequate health services and shopping, and a quiet rural lifestyle.



"The Community Gardens I believe are a good combination of physical activity and healthy eating. People can build their gardens and then go to the farmers market and sell the vegetables and other crops which they've grown. It is a community project the gardens are well publicized to raise awareness in the community" (St. Paul resident).



"This is one of two senior centers. The particular one in the picture is full of fun activities for the seniors, but anybody can rent the facility for weddings, funeral receptions, etc. It has easy access and lots of parking and is well maintained. It is a valuable asset to the community" (St. Paul resident).

Photo-takers described the town as small enough that residents are still able to build a bond with other community members (see photo and caption on the right). As a result photo-takers felt a strong sense of community. A somewhat contrasting view, expressed by some, was the problem of losing the community's youth to the larger urban centers. It was suggested that the youth leave the community because they think there are greater educational and employment opportunities elsewhere. Photo-takers acknowledged that this was a problem common to many small rural communities in Alberta, particularly for those communities that rely largely on agriculture.

ETHNICALLY AND CULTURALLY DIVERSE COMMUNITY

Most photo-takers saw St. Paul as ethnically and culturally diverse. The photo-takers spoke of deep French, Ukrainian and Aboriginal roots. These cultures reflect the early history and settlements in the community (see picture and caption on the right). The Taste of St. Paul event highlights the community's diversity and is hosted by the community yearly. The event helps to promote the diversity of ethnic and culinary cultures. Many photo-takers expressed that these ethnic and cultural groups "add flavor" to the community at these types of events. Despite this, the traditions of different cultural groups are not as visible on a daily basis as they used to be. Some photo-takers expressed concern that the community's various ethnic and cultural identities were being lost or forgotten.

INCREASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Photo-takers described the town as having a general east/west orientation with a highway dissecting the town into north and south sides. The highway serves as the main street running the length of the town. There has been increased development of new commercial activity recently. For example, box type retailers such as Canadian Tire and Home Hardware have moved into the community. The larger retail stores are located on the edges of town and away from the town center.



"St. Paul is a people kind of place. That is the town's motto" (St. Paul resident).



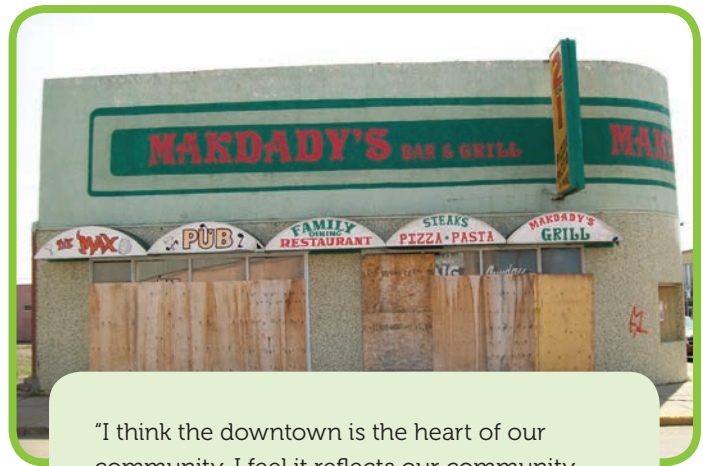
"This is by the lake on Lakeshore Drive. It is right on the trail. There is a plaque that describes the first European settlers to the St. Paul area who began farming and raising their families here" (St. Paul resident).

The majority of the photo-takers agreed that increased community development away from the town center has resulted in a number of vacant buildings or lots in the downtown core (see picture and caption on the right). The now vacant buildings and lots were places previously occupied by smaller versions of the same store or by local independent merchants. As a result, smaller stores have been forced out of the marketplace. Photo-takers suggested that this is a common feature of many small prairie communities in Alberta that are experiencing growth and economic development. Despite this, many photo-takers expressed concerns about the effects this change had in the downtown area and on the broader community.

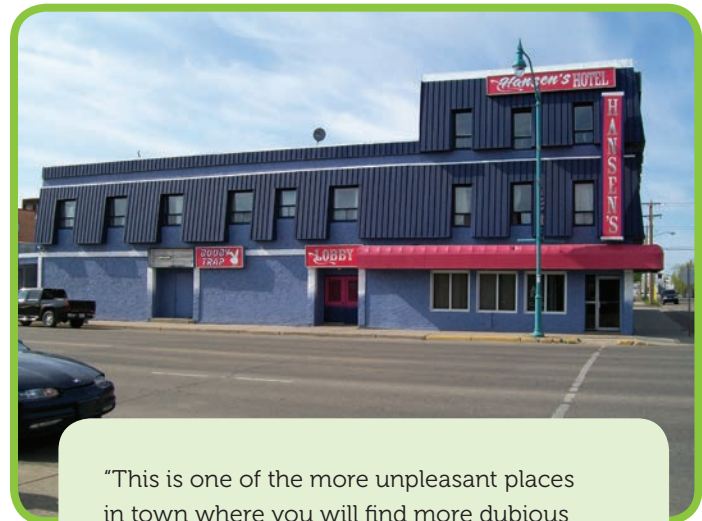
THE "HEART" OF THE COMMUNITY - DOWNTOWN

Unattractive buildings, vacant lots, graffiti, vandalism, and "dubious characters" were said to represent a decaying downtown core in need of revitalization. Concerns surrounding the downtown core went beyond the exterior of buildings (physical environment) to include aspects related to the social environment. Photo-takers also described the fear of being accosted by panhandlers, drunks and homeless individuals (see picture and caption on the right). Further, photo-takers suggested that these activities and the sight of litter, graffiti, and boarded up buildings was depressing. One photo-taker illustrated similar concerns in her story, *"Main Street is the heart of the community and when your heart is sick your community reflects it. You know as far as mental health, when you see stuff going on and you are disgusted. So you go home and you don't feel happy or proud about your community"* (St. Paul Resident).

Photo-takers felt that crime and vandalism were on the rise in St. Paul. The photo-takers expressed concern that there may be tension among some residents of the Town of St. Paul. The tension arose



"I think the downtown is the heart of our community. I feel it reflects our community. This building in the heart of the town has since been demolished" (St. Paul resident).



"This is one of the more unpleasant places in town where you will find more dubious characters. I don't like to walk around there and I know lots of people don't like walking around there too. The new owners seem to have cleaned it up a bit. The pan handling around there has stopped and it has been repainted but I would still prefer not to walk around there" (St. Paul resident).

because many of the Town's emergency services (police, ambulance, etc.) were frequently tied up dealing with problems in the surrounding First Nation's communities.

COMMUNITY PHYSICAL ACTIVITY OPPORTUNITIES

Most photo-takers were familiar with the facilities for physical activity and recreation in the community and felt fortunate to have the quality and variety of facilities available in St. Paul (see picture and caption on the right). Some of the features or facilities mentioned that promoted activity included: Lagasse Park, the swimming pool, the two ice arenas, the curling rink, the AG Corral, the tennis courts, the golf course, baseball diamonds, the bowling alley, the skateboard park, various playgrounds and parks, and Upper Therien Lake.

Upper Therien Lake, on the southern side of town, was described as a focal point for the community. Most of the photo-takers talked about or took photographs of the lake and the surrounding park area. Photo-takers spoke of these locations as attractive and accessible outdoor, leisure locations.

COMMUNITY TRAIL SYSTEM

All of the photo-takers were aware of the trail system that circles the perimeter of the town. Generally, the trails were considered an asset for the community and its members. The trail is easy to use, most of it is paved, and it is accessible from almost any area in town (see picture and caption on the right) as mentioned by photo-takers.

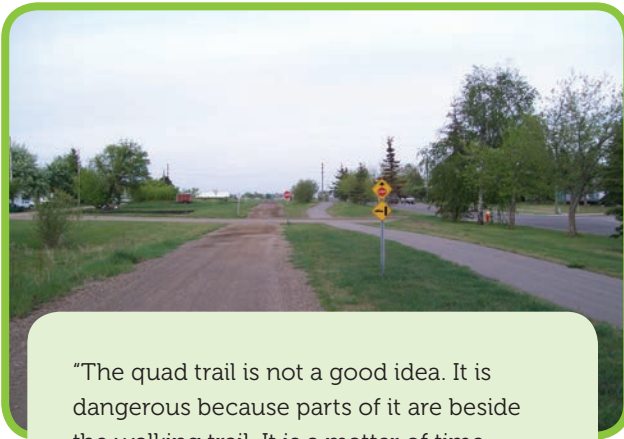
The perimeter trail connects to the trails in Lagasse Park. It was suggested by photo-takers that the perimeter trail was well used by walkers and cyclists. All photo-takers described walking as a physical activity they engaged in. A few possible barriers mentioned in regards to using the trail for walking



"CAP Arena was built by a group of citizens in St. Paul who used their own money to build it. It is the second arena in town and I believe the motivation for building it was to alleviate the stress and discomfort that comes with only having one arena. This way, more kids can have more time to play hockey. The fact that this arena was community built makes it more important to me and that is why I chose it" (St. Paul resident).



"This is by the lake on Lakeshore Drive. It is easy to get to the lake from anywhere in town; you can walk to it. The trail is clean because they have dog mitts to pickup waste as well as garbage cans around for people to dispose their garbage" (St. Paul resident).



“The quad trail is not a good idea. It is dangerous because parts of it are beside the walking trail. It is a matter of time before someone gets run over”
(St. Paul resident).

included aggressive dogs, lack of snow clearing in the winter, and lack of trail lighting that restricted evening use. Negative comments about the trail system included: crosswalks were poorly marked; lack of pedestrian flashing lights or regular traffic lights; and the Town’s infrastructure had failed to keep up with the commercial development. Also, the trail crosses main street (Highway 28) at both east and west ends of town. All photo-takers agreed that crossing Highway 28 at these locations could pose safety concerns for some citizens. Despite this, photo-takers were not concerned about their personal safety while crossing main street.

A touchy issue for some photo-takers, as illustrated by the image and text above, was the section of the trail system that lies next to the Iron Horse Trail. The Iron Horse Trail is referred to in the community as “the Trail”. It is a multi-use trail that is part of the Trans Canada Trail System linking St. Paul to other communities. Walkers, hikers, runners, skiers, cyclists, horseback riders, and all terrain vehicles (ATVs) such as quads and snowmobiles are all permitted on the Trail. Some of the concerns mentioned about the Trail were:

- it is an irritation to land and homeowners;
- air pollution from the motorized equipment is alongside walkers and runners on the pedestrian trail;
- noise issues;
- quad users not obeying the speed, stop, and yield signs posted;
- the Trail does not promote physical activity;
- issues of safety for young children using the pedestrian trail; and,
- ATV users not wearing helmets.

Despite the concerns highlighted above, many photo-takers saw the Trail as an asset to the community (see picture and caption on the right).

Photo-takers suggested the Trail attracts visitors from out of town who spend money in the community. The Trail also provides an accessible place for physical activity and recreation for community members.



“The Iron Horse Trail is used for walking, running, bicycling, quading, and snowmobiling. It is really beautiful. You can see wildlife in its habitat. People come from all over the place to use the Trail because it leads to other communities. People should and do respect the trial etiquette”
(St. Paul resident).

The Iron Horse Trail was said to be well maintained with appropriate signage and information. The Trail is monitored by the Town Bylaw Enforcement Officer and the RCMP. Several photo-takers agreed that policing of the Trail was inadequate. It was suggested that lack of policing was due to limited resources and the low priority it receives compared to automobile-related issues. Accessibility to the Trail was reported as good, with a parking lot and staging area located near the soccer fields.

SOCCER AS A POPULAR COMMUNITY ACTIVITY

The new soccer fields were the most frequently mentioned and photographed community physical activity facility. Photo-takers reported that these soccer fields were constructed to facilitate the growth in soccer and the demand for quality playing fields in St. Paul. The local Lions Club was a major sponsor of the project and additional support was provided by many other community businesses. Concerns expressed by some of photo-takers was that the growth in soccer meant there was a drop in participation in other activities. Also, the older soccer fields were no longer well-utilized or maintained. Only one photo-taker reported being actively involved in soccer.



“The soccer field is close to my house and convenient for me to walk to. Access is monitored so not just anyone can use the field. There are a number of fields available in the community so various leagues have fields they can use” (St. Paul resident).

ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION

St. Paul was identified as a “walkable” community by most photo-takers. The photo-takers suggested that the town was still small enough that one could walk to get almost anywhere if desired. Most of the photo-takers felt safe walking anywhere in the community during the daytime. The perimeter trail system connecting to Lagasse Park was frequently mentioned as a place that was easy to access and an enjoyable place to walk for sightseeing and exercise.



“This is a nicer neighborhood in Spring Park where retirees reside. I want to point out they don’t have sidewalks. I think it’s because it would have cost another half million dollars for the project. It is not a high traffic area but it doesn’t promote mobility in the winter” (St. Paul resident).

Photo-takers highlighted that many of the newer subdivisions do not have sidewalks (as shown by the photograph above). One photo-taker, who used a stroller to transport her young children around, also noted that the quality and presence of sidewalks varied throughout the town. The variances in sidewalks created safety issues for pushing the

stroller where the sidewalks were broken, cracked, or missing, which forced them to walk on the road. These factors often determined or influenced what routes could be taken and, therefore, limited the ability to walk in certain areas of town. One photo-taker suggested increasing the number of stop signs in residential areas would help reduce the speed of traffic and promote walking in the community.

CAR CULTURE

A couple of photo-takers contrasted the notion of St. Paul as a “walkable” community with discussion of “car culture”. One photo-taker mentioned that residents’ have an overreliance on vehicles as their main mode of transportation. The “car culture” led one photo-taker to claim *“the mentality out there is you are a loser if you are walking any place”* and *“it is not cool to bike in St. Paul”*. Concerns about cycling downtown due to vehicle traffic were also expressed. The decrease in safety made it difficult for people who wanted to commute to work on bicycle.

MOTIVATION FOR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

A common theme among most photo-takers was that they were not as physically active as they thought they should or would like to be. The lack of physical activity was more because of personal choice than lack of facilities or recreational opportunities. Some photo-takers noted that having more or different facilities in the community *“would not make you more fit or healthier”* and *“people still need to make good choices”*. Most of the photo-takers spoke of being busy with work, school, and families. Lack of time was the main reason for not using the community’s recreation facilities. Photo-takers with young children spoke of involvement with their kids’ activities (such as driving to and organizing events) as the main source of physical activity. Older photo-takers spoke of the *“empty nest syndrome”* where their children had grown up and moved away from home. As a result, the older photo-takers were no longer active in keeping children busy with practices, games, dance lessons, and other physical activities. The loss of activity in other peoples’ lives led them to have a lack of motivation for being physically involved themselves.

FREE OR “UNSTRUCTURED” PLAY

Most photo-takers responded to the question *“How do you reply when teenagers say that there is nothing to do in St. Paul?”* by saying that there is a lot to do, both in organized and unstructured activities. The skateboard park (see photo and caption below) was the most photographed facility, outside

“I believe this picture of the local skateboard park shows that we have healthy activities available for the youth in our community. This is really important because it keeps them active and involved in something positive. I think it is a good initiative but it needs to be further structured because of the kids being targeted; boundaries need to be in place” (St. Paul resident).



of playgrounds, that promoted free or unstructured play for children and teenagers. Some photo-takers commented that the youth today did not really know how to “do” free play, such as tag or playground games. Photo-takers perceived teenagers as generally less motivated, too lazy to participate, or too busy with computer and video games. Many photo-takers echoed the St. Paul resident’s quote above that more effort is required to promote “free play” for children today. One photo-taker emphasized that good programming was required, along with good facilities, to promote physical activity in the community. None of the photo-takers used the skateboard park themselves.



“Al’s Market Gardening is a local company well known for their carrots. They are available only in season and I think the fact that it is homegrown and popular among the locals promotes the whole idea of healthy eating. I have heard many people say that these carrots taste better and even the kids can tell the difference” (St. Paul resident).

SEASONALITY AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Most photo-takers stated that personal physical activity levels were affected by the time of year. All but one photo-taker stated that they were less active in the winter because of the climate and the weather in the region. A few photo-takers spoke to the need/desire for a large indoor recreation facility, similar to Bonnyville’s recreation complex, for winter time use. An indoor facility would allow families to be active together, to keep kids out of trouble, to allow seniors a place to walk indoors during bad weather, and to allow for indoor soccer during the winter.



“The Farmers’ Market sign is new and always up. At the market you have healthy options and lots of people in the community shop there” (St. Paul resident).

GROCERY STORES AND LOCAL MARKETS

All of the photo-takers felt that they had access to quality food and healthy food choices at grocery stores in their community. They mentioned Sobey’s on the east end of town and Extra Foods on the west side as the two most prominent grocery stores. Further, most photo-takers were aware of food safety issues such as the use of pesticide and chemicals. They indicated that organic foods were available at both grocery stores. Photo-takers placed a high value on foods locally grown in their community, as illustrated by the two photographs above.



"The bus in this picture represents mobility, accessibility, and transportation to the elderly and the retirees. It helps seniors who cannot drive get from A to B; it takes them to medical appointments in neighbouring towns, to bingo, to tournaments, and shopping. It also serves as a taxi with a charge of \$5 per trip shared amongst the passengers" (St. Paul resident).

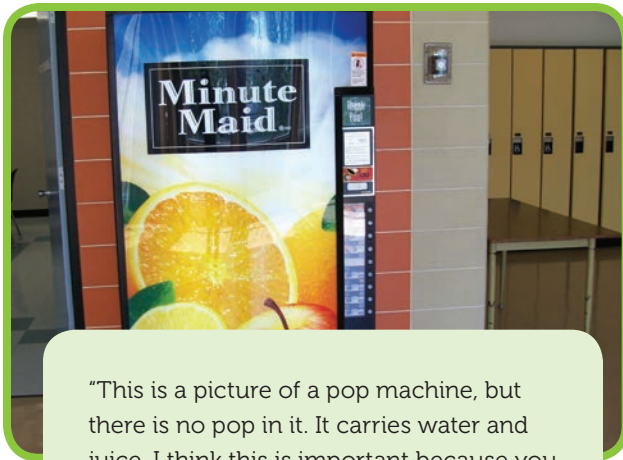
Most of the photo-takers spoke of the Farmers' Market as a good source of fresh, quality, and healthy food. The market enabled community members to get together. Photo-takers spoke about liking the ability to buy locally grown and produced foods and craft products from fellow community members. Photo-takers mentioned that increased government regulations regarding food safety issues were making it more difficult for the sale of some items. For example, meats and dairy products that required government inspection and onsite refrigeration were hard to find at the Farmers' Market. Access to the Farmers' Market, located at the Recreation Center, was reported as being excellent. The Community Action Bus contributed to the accessibility of the Farmers' Market as it brought seniors to the Market (as highlighted in the picture and caption above).

COMMUNITY RESTAURANTS AND FAST FOOD

A consensus among photo-takers suggested that *"if you want to eat healthy you should eat at home"*. The photo-takers agreed that St. Paul had limited options for eating out. The limit in healthy options was particularly the case regarding the diversity of food choices and fine dining restaurants. Most however, did not believe that there were problems accessing healthy eating options at the restaurants that were in the community. Consensus among photo-takers suggested fast food restaurants were easily accessible in the community, usually very busy, and that they did not offer many healthy food choices (see picture and caption on the right).



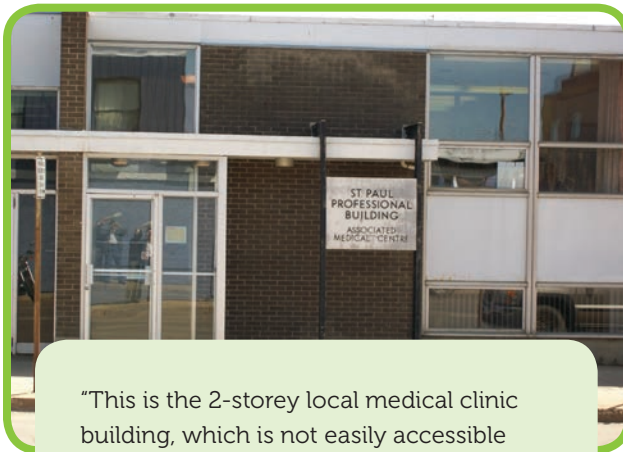
"This is a picture of McDonald's which I think is pretty much an unhealthy place to eat. Even though they have some healthy options on the menu I do not see the majority choosing these healthy options" (St. Paul resident).



“This is a picture of a pop machine, but there is no pop in it. It carries water and juice. I think this is important because you have to start healthy lifestyle education as early as possible” (St. Paul resident).

HEALTHY BODY, HEALTHY MIND

Two photo-takers, one teenager and one adult, noted that there has been movement within the school division towards offering children access to healthier choices in vending machines in the schools. The traditional pop or soda beverages were being replaced by juices and water in the vending machines. When asked how students responded to this change, the teenage photo-taker suggested that some of them were upset at first, but that it is not as big of an issue anymore. The adult photo-taker suggested that students in school provide a captive audience that can be presented with healthy alternative choices (see picture and caption on the left).



“This is the 2-storey local medical clinic building, which is not easily accessible for patients with limited mobility as some of the doctors are on the second floor and there are no wheelchair ramps or elevators. They should relocate to a building with wheelchair accessibility, as it is not worth renovating the current building. I think it’s ridiculous to have a clinic where patients can’t get to see their doctors easily” (St. Paul resident)

Summary Snapshots

The photo-takers of this project generally viewed the physical features and facilities of their community as very good and more than adequate to meet community needs. Photo-takers did not perceive the community environment as limiting access or presenting significant barriers in decisions to be physically active or eat healthy food. However, many photo-takers acknowledged the potential that some individuals, such as seniors and the physically disabled, may have difficulty accessing some of the community’s physical features (e.g., medical clinics) and facilities (see picture and caption on the left). The difficulty accessing these services was usually expressed in terms of transportation issues, such as not having access to a vehicle, or the lack of a public transit system in the community.

The role of social features in affecting the photo-takers’ decisions in being physically active or eating healthy food varied and was often represented by individual life stages. Teenagers were concerned about convenience and relationships with friends and peers. Adults with young children focused on juggling busy schedules and a lack of time for themselves. Personal motivation affected older adults

whose children had grown up and moved away. In addition, seniors may be worried about rising costs of living and quality of health care.

All of the photo-takers expressed enjoyment in participating in the photovoice project. Many of the photo-takers stated that it gave them the opportunity to get out and explore their community and remind them of what facilities and activities they had available. The photo-takers also occasionally discovered something new about their community.

Who We Are

The researchers from the University of Alberta have partnered with a group of stakeholders from the St. Paul Community. The community working group helps to represent the diverse nature of the community and includes members from Community Futures St. Paul-Smoky Lake, County of St. Paul, Healthy Alberta Communities, St. Paul Town Council, and the Town of St. Paul.

What's Next?

The researchers will work with community stakeholders to develop community projects. The goal of the projects is to help community members be more physically active and choose to eat healthy food.

The community stakeholders from St. Paul have identified that they would like to encourage unstructured play among younger generations. The project has been named St. Paul MOVES! (Motivation; Opportunity; Variety; Enjoy; Success).

St. Paul MOVES! was started in the winter of 2009 when the community working group partnered with the two local school boards (St. Paul Education Regional Division and East Central Francophone Education Region). For this phase of the project, high school students developed, organized and implemented unstructured play activities for elementary school children to play. The second phase of the project included expanding youth instruction of unstructured play activities to the broader community during the summer of 2009. Unstructured play is being expanded even further for the summer of 2010. University students will be hired for a four month period to further engage the community children in free play!

Watch for the youth leaders in the local playgrounds this summer!

Thank You!

The researchers and community stakeholders would like to thank all of the photo-takers for sharing their stories. All of the pictures in this summary document were from the project.

For more information about this project, please contact:

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Our Community Partners:

Community Futures St. Paul-Smoky Lake

County of St. Paul

Healthy Alberta Communities

St. Paul Town Council

Town of St. Paul

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