

Social Benefits of Sustainable Urban Development

Most people equate sustainable urban development with protecting the health of our natural environment. But true sustainability also means economic and social sustainability. Traditional suburban development has been criticized by social scientists for being socially flawed -- isolating people from each other and from the larger community, especially if they have no independent access to a car.

Yet there is a widely-held view that when you've bought a detached home in the suburbs, you've achieved a major step towards happiness. But if it means heavy financial costs, long commuting times, property maintenance every weekend, less time for family and friends, and so on, the negatives can outstrip the positives.

Partly, the desire to own a home in the suburbs has been to escape the grime and crime (real or perceived) of the big city. Affordability is also a key consideration; generally speaking, the farther out from the city core, the less expensive a home becomes. But if a home in the suburbs is not the formula for happiness, could a home in a sustainable urban environment be? Sustainable communities are, by definition, denser than typical suburbs, more energy-efficient, much less dependent on travel by automobile, mix residential and non-residential places, and are mostly dominated by smaller housing forms that are not detached homes. Sustainable urban communities bring with them a variety of positive social outcomes for their inhabitants, some of which are listed here:

- People who do not or cannot drive cars have the means to access their destinations using active transportation (walking, bicycling) because distances are relatively shorter, or can access destinations by public transit because sustainable development enables better services. The complications of arranging for others to drive them are reduced and, overall, isolation is reduced and independence is improved.
- Because walking is a much more frequent mode of travel in sustainable communities, there is more casual social contact along the way, and more opportunity to develop friendships. Where the children's 'backyard' is the neighbourhood, more interaction with other children and adults helps to develop social skills.
- Municipal services, such as programs offered in community centres, are closer in denser communities, which can foster increases in participation rates (e.g. music programs, sports, theater).
- People living in sustainable communities have a variety of cultures, backgrounds and differing circumstances. In very walkable environments, day-to-day exposure to the wider spectrum of society increases understanding of others, which tends to reduce fears of people who are different.
- Apartment buildings in sustainable communities can be built to reflect the diversity of households, by providing units both large and small, and by including gathering places and secure outdoor/indoor play areas for children of tenants. This fosters not only connectivity among people

but breaks down the social dichotomy of almost child-free high rise buildings and detached home subdivisions designed to focus on households with children.

- A pedestrian-focused community – where daily needs are accessed by walking – increases not only contact with neighbours, but raises awareness of and concern for the condition of the local community, the public realm. In suburban automobile-dependent communities, the lands between home and the mall are less noticeable and less important to drivers.
- The public library, community centre and parks become more valuable to people. For municipalities, this may mean greater acceptance and/or understanding regarding public service expenditures.
- There are more ‘eyes on the street’ in sustainable – higher density – communities, which helps to reduce the incidence of crime in public places.
- Sustainable urban communities offer a wide variety of housing choices within a neighbourhood, including choices for people at various income levels, as well as for those who are disadvantaged by frailty, disability or other reasons. More choices can enable households to remain in the same neighbourhood as their life circumstances evolve, enabling community ties and friendships to be maintained.
- Less money is spent on energy and transportation in sustainable communities. This opens up opportunities for families to fund other priorities.
- More affordable housing, energy and transportation mean less financial stress, a key influence on social well-being for household members.
- Affordability means there is less need for two incomes in the households, which means more time can be available for being with the family’s children, household maintenance, leisure pursuits, and/or more time for volunteering in the community.
- Walking to daily destinations improves personal health and vitality which, in turn, fosters positive mood and intellect. Sedentary lifestyles among children and adults are a serious contributor to poor health and higher health care costs.
- Walkability means that local small businesses experience more casual walk-in customers, improving their success. In suburban areas, zoning favours national retail chains and large businesses. In sustainable urban environments, the aspirations of individual entrepreneurs are more likely to be realized.
- Where small businesses such as retail shops are mixed into high density neighbourhoods, the connection between shopper and merchant is strengthened by familiarity.
- Mixing non-residential uses into denser urban environments provides greater access to, and/or knowledge of, employment opportunities in the local area; in car-dependent areas, job-search efforts of those who are too poor to own a car are seriously disadvantaged.
- Being employed near home reduces commuting time, which in turn reduces stress and creates more time for other priorities.
- People in sustainable communities have the satisfaction of knowing that they are lower consumers of energy, water, land and material resources than suburban residents.

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