Greenways - The Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail: Green and Blue Spaces and Places

This casebook example explores the programs and activities that are helping to protect and/or enhance greenspaces as settings for public health and well-being. Taken from Leveraging the Benefits of Greenspace for Environmental and Public Health Benefits: A Casebook of Ontario Initiatives (2017)

Summary
Greenways are important for connecting communities and places. Engaging the public and promoting physical activity is a major benefit of greenways. In addition to exercise, greenways serve as ecological corridors that connect people, neighbourhoods, communities and towns. As a green space itself, the Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail also leverages the health and well-being benefits of blue spaces: a key goal is to route the trail as close to the water's edge as environmentally feasible. Issues around equity and access are important, particularly with regard to maintaining a freely accessible trail and to supporting and maintaining public access to waterfronts and water resources. The trail is part of the new generation of multi-objective greenways that are contributing to the revitalization, restoration and regeneration of the Great Lakes waterfront and the province.

Introduction/Background
Greenways are important for connecting communities and places. Searns (1995) identified three distinct phases of greenway development: from boulevards and parkways, to trail-oriented recreational pathways, to multi-objective greenways. Little (1990) defined them as “linear open space established either along a natural corridor, such as a riverfront, stream valley or ridgeline, or overland along a railroad right-of-way that has been converted to recreational use, a canal, a scenic road, or other route”. The development of multi-use greenways surged in the 1980s, with increasing interest in the multiple benefits of these routes for economic, social, cultural and ecological reasons (Fabos and Ryan, 2006). They were originally linear spaces, but are now more aptly referred to as greenway networks that create a ‘green matrix’ (Kullman, 2013). Greenways are primarily used for recreation, although in some cities and town they also act as key transportation corridors. Greenways provide opportunities for active living that produces fitness and health benefits, create alternate transportation routes, support the conservation of habitats and biodiversity, protect and conserve historical sites, foster economic development, and provide aesthetic, visual, and psychological amenities (Lindsey et al., 2004).

The Waterfront Regeneration Trust was established in 1992 to implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront. Its vision is a regenerated Great Lakes waterfront. The Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail system (Figure F-1) is part of the Greenway Strategy and is one of the key initiatives supporting that vision. As stated on the Waterfront Trail website (2016), the trail is critical to “connect people to their Great Lakes waterfront. In doing so, ... [people are] inspired to become advocates for a healthy, vibrant waterfront ... we envision a Great Lakes Waterfront Trail that is ‘complete and connected,’ an integral part of each ecosystem it passes through, enhancing the environment, economy, society and history of every community that participates in the development and use of the Trail”. The Trail now runs over 1600km in Ontario and on into Quebec, and is set to expand to Northern Ontario along the north channel of Lake Huron from Sault Sainte Marie to Sudbury. As part of its commitment to contributing to a broader trail network, it is part of the Trans Canada Trail as well as the St. Lawrence bikeway and the Niagara River Recreational Trail.
As of 2013, the trail connected:

- 2 Great Lakes; 3 bi-national rivers; 3 UNESCO Biospheres; 68 communities; 19 Provincial Parks; 3 National Parks, including Canada’s first National Urban Park; 15 National Historical Sites; 325 municipal parks; 58 conservation areas; 90 beaches, including 8 Blue Flag awarded beaches; 3 major wine regions; 25 historical village main streets; 10 Bicycle Friendly Communities; 16 Ontario by Bike (formerly Welcome Cyclists) Network Regions; 427 businesses designated as bike-friendly; 8 international border crossings, and over 40 major connecting trails (Waterfront Regeneration Trust, 2013, p.3).

It is a world-renowned tourist attraction, as well as a recreation, fitness and green transportation amenity that is connected to the Ontario Greenbelt Trail network in Cobourg and potentially through the new expansion of the Greenbelt into the ravine system in and around Toronto (see Case 8). Work is currently underway to connect the trail to the Metrolinx system, connecting commuters and recreational Trail users to GO stations across the region. The result of the Greenbelt to Great Lake connections will be a regional watershed network of trails, paths and public transit systems.

**Health and Well-being**

Ecological health imperatives are the enduring impetus behind the Trail, however, public health has become a compelling incentive for community and public participation in the initiative. Promoting physical activity is a major public health benefit of greenways. Public health movements such as Active Living by Design and Healthy People 2020 focus attention on the need for a structural environment (sidewalks, bike lines, trails, etc.) that supports active lifestyle choices for people across all life stages and ages. Most trails are free to use, making them well-suited to advance equity goals and to support the health of the general public. In addition to bicycling and walking, trails can be used for jogging, rollerblading, horse riding, cross-country skiing and are suitable for wheelchair uses, parents with children in strollers and other groups. Maintaining and promoting public ownership and access to the waterfront is an important asset in an age of increasingly privatized space.

Proximity to a trailhead is important, particularly for older adults (Dorwart, 2015). A relatively large on-site survey in Chicago “showed that trail location relative to home strongly influenced how a greenway trail was used, who used it, how often it was used, and other factors” (Gobster, 1995, p. 401). The study advocated an emphasis on local trails to enhance access, which then connect to regional and provincial/state trail systems. Renalds et al. (2010) found that more walkable neighbourhoods are associated with increased physical activity, increased social capital, lower levels of obesity and depression, and less alcohol use. They also can help unite communities and neighbourhoods that are otherwise segregated by race or class (Coutts and Miles, 2011). Greenways also connect urban and rural landscapes.

The overarching purpose of the Waterfront Regeneration Trust is to reconnect people and communities to the Great Lakes – the largest group of freshwater lakes in the world. The trail leverages the power of this ‘blue’ space (Box F-1) as a therapeutic landscape (Gesler, 1992) that enhances human health and well-being (Finlay et al., 2015; Volker and Kistemann, 2011, 2013; White et al., 2010). Indeed, a key focus of the Waterfront Trail is to move the trail closer to the water’s edge (Waterfront Trail, 2013).

**Actions**

The Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail aims to be part of a clean, green, connected, accessible, affordable, open, useable, diverse and attractive greenway. These are known as the nine waterfront principles. It has been credited with helping regenerate the waterfront, by increasing public attention to the waterfront landscape and amenities through access and interpretive signs. By setting the trail in a larger greenway, the Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail becomes “more than a walking or
cycling facility”. It is an essential part of a new relationship to the waterfront and a catalyst for ecological and community renewal including: revitalizing brownfields, green space enhancements and habitat restoration … improving the trail and making connections” (Waterfront Regeneration Trust, 2013, p.6).

In 2014, the Waterfront Regeneration Trust concluded a partner-wide strategic planning process that resulted in expanding the vision for the Trail to include all of the Canadian Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River. The goal is to establish the safest route available, nearest to the waterfront, using existing infrastructure. Priorities are identified for improvements and enhancements. Together, the communities, who own and maintain the Trail, and the Waterfront Regeneration Trust work to make improvements and enhancements. An example of moving the Trail closer to the water’s edge is the Trust’s work with the Province (PanAm Legacy Fund) and the Central Lake Ontario Conservation Authority to move the Waterfront Trail off the busy Bayly/Victoria Rd in west Whitby. The realignment addressed important safety issues and connected the Trail to two provincially significant wetlands. The result is a continuous, off-road trail from Highland Creek in Toronto to Oshawa’s Lakeview Park. Closing the gap has increased the utility and popularity of the Trail in Durham.

Tourism is a key driver for communities connecting to regional trail systems, particularly in rural areas. It represents a low-carbon tourist strategy that helps achieve climate change adaptation goals (Mundet and Coenders, 2010) while contributing to the local economy of towns and villages linked to the Trail. The Waterfront Regeneration Trust launched a fully supported annual cycling holiday in 2008 as way to engage and inform the public of the Trail. For the majority of participants, the event introduced them to parts of the Province and waterfront they had never known. In the 2013 survey, 91% saw the Trail as an important part of regenerating the waterfront; 70% would be likely to take a more active interest in issues affecting the Great Lakes. (GWTA 2013 Participant Survey Results).

The Lake Ontario Trail website provides an interactive map, as well as connections to the local tourist destinations and associations along the route. These include a wide range of parks, beaches and green spaces. Maintaining, improving and expanding the trail system requires continual engagement in urban and rural planning processes at a variety of spatial scales. The Waterfront Regeneration Trust surveyed planners along the Lake Ontario section of the Trail in 2013 and learned that 82% of communities had a waterfront vision in their planning documents; 89% have a vision for public access at the waterfront. These planning documents are the policy framework protecting the legacy of the Trail and its vision for regeneration.

The Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail, like many other provincial and national trail systems, relies heavily on rural roads in some areas, which means that motorized and non-motorized transportation are not entirely separate. In rural areas, roads commonly serve as the only active transportation infrastructure for residents. The Trail is comprised of paths (21%), neighbourhood streets (21%) and rural roads (58%). The type of trail has implications for the safety of different user groups, particularly vulnerable populations (seniors, mobility challenged, etc.). A survey of 2013 Great Waterfront Trail Adventure participants found that over 95% would like to have more paved shoulders on the trail route and 59% would like to see the trail move off-road (Waterfront Regeneration Trust, 2013).

Connecting the users of the greenway to natural heritage sites, while maintaining the ecological integrity of these sites, has been a priority since the inception of the Trail project. Rattray Marsh in Mississauga is one example. The trail is connected to the wetland to promote public access, but...
designed so that biking is not permitted on the boardwalk and trails running through the sensitive ecological system (Ontario Trails, 2016). Finding a balance between public access to well-functioning ecological places and their protection and restoration is critical to the success of a greenway trail.

The idea of the Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail came from hundreds of people who participated in public hearings held in 1988. It will take generations to achieve the goal of dedicated path at the water’s edge. One of the biggest threats to the accomplishments of the past 21 years is complacency on the part of municipal staff, and disenchantment from the public. A continuous, signed Trail serves as a living progress report, giving people first-hand experience of accomplishments, challenges and imperatives to achieving ecological health.

Discussion

Multi-objective greenways recognize that these greenways can be designed to go beyond recreation and beautification to address other needs and values, such as wildlife habitat, flood protection, water quality improvement, outdoor education and natural and cultural heritage. These multiple benefits require additional thought, planning and design in order to be realized for a given trail system. Manton et al. (2016) define the key features of greenways as: exclusive to non-motorized travel (other than mobility devices, such as scooters, etc.); accessible to those of all abilities, separated from motorized traffic and, ecological benefits. These features are challenging to realize for large trail systems and, indeed, large sections of the Lake Ontario Trail are not exclusive to non-motorized travel.

The Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail is strongly focused on connecting the blue and green spaces that enhance public life. “The legacy goal for the Trail is to become a dedicated off-road path as close to the water’s edge as environmentally feasible” (p.3). The trail has inspired the regeneration and restoration of brownfields and otherwise degraded landscapes along the waterfront, and is increasingly shaping the public perception and experience of lands further upstream. It has inspired new parks, protected wetlands and habitat restoration initiatives that “will bring animals, birds, plants and people back to the Great Lakes waterfront” (Waterfront Regeneration Trust, 2013, p.7). The Waterfront Trail creates a strong link between local green spaces and cultural centres and the Great Lake system that they are part of. They connect people not only to their local places, but also to that larger system and makes changes to the Lake system (e.g. water quality, water quantity, biodiversity) relevant to greenway trail users across the province. Fostering this sense of connection to the larger landscape it vital to gaining public support for greenway protection and enhancement. Promoting the therapeutic value of exposure to blue and green landscapes, in addition to the physical health benefits of trail use, is an additional benefit provided by the Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail to trail users. Revitalizing and restoring the valuable waterfront land, including natural and cultural heritage sites, and ensuring public access and connection to the Great Lakes ecosystem, has a myriad of positive implications for the region.

Discussion Questions

1. How does connection to landscapes influence people’s attitudes and behaviour toward these spaces and places?

2. What are the social benefits that can be obtained from trail systems in greenways Are there opportunities to enhance the Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail to increase its value for human health and wellbeing? What would be required to realize these benefits?

For More Information about the Case, See: