

Strengthening Municipal Partnerships Through the Built Environment Program

To: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

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Recommendations

It is recommended that the Board of Health receive this report for information.

Key Points

- Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph (WDG) Public Health's Built Environment Program supports local municipalities in their efforts to design complete communities through partner consultations, land use planning policy development and community collaboratives.
- The Built Environment Program recently concentrated efforts on strengthening partnerships with municipalities to enhance healthy community design collaborations. This was achieved by working across municipal programming areas, being added to land use planning circulation lists and supporting priority projects.
- As a result of partnership building efforts, WDG Public Health almost doubled its number of land use planning submissions and projects in 2025 while supporting healthy built environment initiatives across all WDG regions.
- A key example of these collaborations is the impact of WDG Public Health's land use planning comment submission to the Town of Grand Valley's Official Plan Update in 2024, whereby 75% of WDG Public Health's comments were incorporated.
- WDG Public Health continues to provide evidence-informed recommendations to support healthy community design initiatives that contribute to the health and well-being of WDG communities.

Background

The built environment refers to the physical environment where individuals live, work and play.¹ It includes the planning and design of buildings, roads and greenspaces, including homes, schools, workplaces, shops, parks and transportation systems. The way a community is designed can greatly impact the health of people by influencing behaviours or creating conditions that contribute to health or disease.^{1,2} For example, designing neighbourhoods that include parks and trails where residents can conveniently walk, or bike supports greater physical activity, mental wellness and social connections.¹

Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph (WDG) Public Health's Built Environment Program supports local municipalities in their efforts to design complete communities, where people of all ages and abilities can conveniently access most of their daily amenities close to home and work.³ This work is largely undertaken by WDG Public Health promoting the design of healthy and complete communities through partner consultations, community collaboratives, and by commenting on land use planning documents with a public health lens. Examples of land use planning documents include municipal official plans, master plans, subdivision plans and design guidelines.

As described in the [November 2024 Board of Health Report, Built Environment Program Needs Assessment](#), WDG Public Health was able to better understand local planner needs and identify opportunities for collaboration. Planners indicated they view WDG Public Health as a trusted source of health research and a valued land use planning commenting partner, with commenting submissions providing strong rationale and credibility for incorporating healthy community design elements into projects. This report highlights how WDG Public Health has since focused its efforts to support municipalities in creating healthy built environments, which was achieved by expanding partnerships with planners and municipal departments, being added to municipal land use planning circulation lists and contributing to local land use planning priority projects.

Discussion

Land Use Planning Collaborations in 2025

Municipal Partnerships

Designing complete communities requires a multi-sectoral approach and collaboration across various municipal departments and program areas. As such, WDG Public Health's Built Environment Program has made a concerted effort to expand its partnerships with municipalities beyond planning departments. For example, WDG Public collaborates with municipal services such as transportation, operations, parks and recreation, economic development, and environmental services. This approach has strengthened WDG Public Health's ability to integrate healthy built environment concepts across municipal policies, programs and projects that influence community design.

Circulation Lists and Notifications

Municipal planning departments frequently use email circulation lists to notify organizations of land use planning opportunities for comment and engagement. However, these are traditionally reserved for official commenting agencies identified by the Ontario Planning Act.⁴ As public health units are not listed as a legislated official commenting agency, WDG Public Health has worked with municipal departments to be added to numerous circulation lists. In addition, WDG Public Health actively monitors municipal websites, social media accounts and council minutes to identify additional land use planning opportunities and address any notification gaps. Staff also attend public meetings and engagement events related to these projects, providing opportunities to connect with project staff members and contribute to consultations.

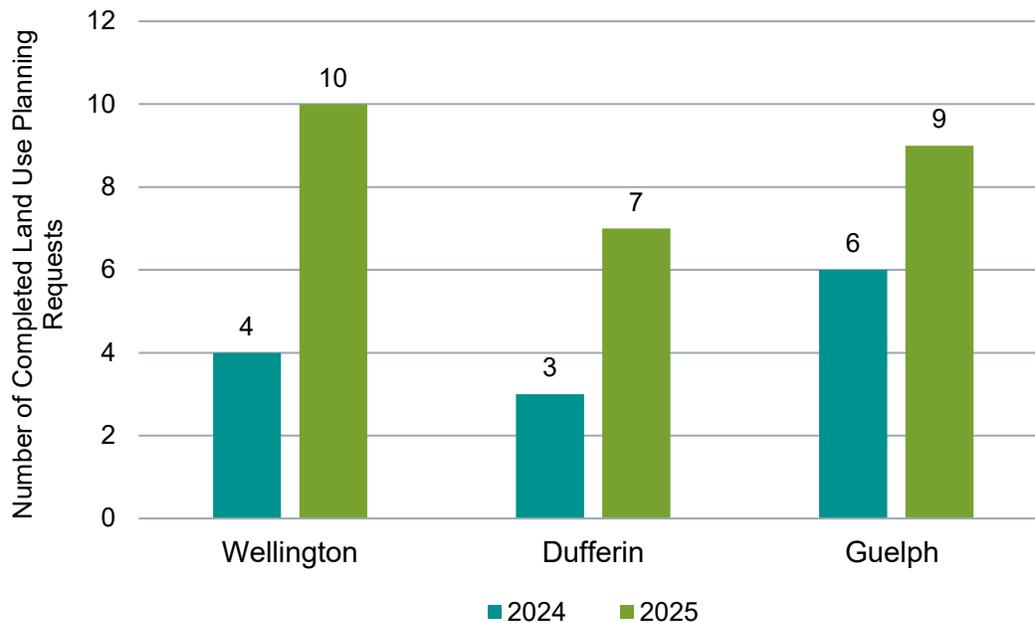
Land Use Planning Requests

As a result of partnership-building efforts and prior commenting submissions, WDG Public Health almost doubled its number of submissions and projects in 2025 compared to 2024 (Table 1) while continuing to support healthy built environment initiatives across all WDG regions (Figure 1). Municipalities have also reached out directly to Built Environment Program staff to consult on key projects. This includes requests for public health expertise, local data, research and participation on project working groups. While re-engagement efforts have significantly increased request opportunities, it is important to note that these projects are largely driven by municipal priorities and resources, thus the number and scope of municipal land use planning projects can vary annually and by region. Furthermore, WDG Public Health is developing an evaluation plan to assess the impact of submissions, which will reflect the diverse types of land use planning requests.

Table 1. Number of Completed Land Use Planning Requests, by Request Type

| Type of Request | 2024 | 2025 |
|--|-----------|-----------|
| Official Plan/Official Plan Amendment Review | 1 | |
| Master Plan Review | 1 | 4 |
| Block Plan/Subdivision Plan Review | 3 | 4 |
| Zoning Bylaw/Bylaw Review | 1 | 3 |
| Design Guidelines/Plan Review | | 8 |
| Strategic Plan Review | 1 | |
| Building Code Review | | 1 |
| Consultation | 6 | 6 |
| Project Working Group | 1 | 1 |
| Total | 14 | 27 |

Figure 1. Number of Completed Land Use Planning Requests, by Region*



*WDG Public Health completed an additional land use planning request in 2024 for the Guelph-Wellington region and supported a review of the National Building Code in 2025, which are not recorded in Figure 1.

WDG Public Health comments on different types of documents to support healthy community design across subject areas and policy types. The following list is an example of the many diverse projects WDG Public Health submitted comments for in 2025:

- Backyard Chicken Bylaw in Mono
- Downtown Streetscape Plans for Erin, Orangeville, Guelph and Puslinch
- Green Development Standards for WDG
- National Building Code of Canada
- Transportation Master Plans for Centre Wellington, Erin and Orangeville
- Subdivision applications in Guelph, Melancthon and Orangeville
- Zoning Bylaws in Guelph

Case Study: Town of Grand Valley's Official Plan Update

Among the many projects WDG Public Health has supported across the WDG region, the Town of Grand Valley's Official Plan Update is one example of a commenting submission that demonstrates the strengthening partnership between WDG Public Health and local municipalities.

An official plan provides policies on how land in a community should be used to meet the needs of current and future populations. For example, it outlines where residential development, employment lands, green spaces and roads should be located and how they can be developed. It also requires all other municipal land use planning documents to be in conformity.⁵ An official plan is therefore the most upstream municipal planning document and has the most potential to impact population health. Commenting on these documents enables WDG Public Health to help influence community design within WDG to be supportive of healthy behaviours and to minimize exposure to environmental hazards.

In 2024, the Town of Grand Valley undertook a review and update of its official plan and WDG Public Health submitted comments that fall. The plan was revised based on public consultations and the final draft was published in 2025.⁶ WDG Public Health had the opportunity to evaluate the inclusion of its recommendations, with 75% of comments being incorporated into the final plan (45 of 60 comments). This outcome further demonstrates Grand Valley's commitment to creating complete communities and utilizing WDG Public Health's expertise in healthy community design best practices. While not all WDG Public Health comments were explicitly incorporated, many were addressed through broader policy language within the official plan or considered within the context of provincial priorities.

The following are examples of built environment concepts that WDG Public Health considers when reviewing land use planning documents. Their significance to supporting healthy community design and how they were successfully incorporated into Grand Valley's official plan is outlined below.

Active Transportation

Active transportation refers to human powered forms of transportation such as walking, cycling, skateboarding and the use of mobility aids like wheelchairs. Active transportation can be used in conjunction with other modes of travel like public transit.⁷ The way a community is designed plays a key role in supporting active travel and making it more accessible. For instance, when amenities such as workplaces, schools, stores and green spaces are located in close proximity, it makes active travel a more convenient and appealing choice. Active transportation contributes to improved population health outcomes by promoting regular physical activity and fostering social interactions among residents.¹

The Grand Valley official plan prioritizes safe, well-connected active transportation opportunities like supporting the development of a town-wide active transportation network with supportive infrastructure. One example where Grand Valley incorporated WDG Public Health feedback to enhance active transportation opportunities was by encouraging the provision of bicycle parking in future subdivisions.

Neighbourhood Connectivity

Grid based road networks, well-connected pathways and trail systems make it easier for people to travel efficiently and access common destinations. Compact street grids provide more direct routes which reduce travel distances and enhance safety for all road users, including drivers, pedestrians and cyclists. Street connectivity encourages active travel and makes trails and pathways more accessible.¹

The Grand Valley official plan incorporated feedback from WDG Public Health to encourage land use patterns and residential developments that are compact and well-connected to support social interactions, active transportation and increase accessibility. For example, the plan now includes additional policies for new urban and mixed-use developments to encourage grid-based street networks and connectivity between road pathways and trails. This will reduce travel times, improve road safety and expand walking and cycling opportunities.

Road Safety

Streets can be designed to reduce the risk and severity of transport injuries and fatalities through traffic calming mechanisms and infrastructure that prioritizes vulnerable road users. Considering the safety of pedestrians, cyclists and people with limited mobility and/or disabilities alongside motorists, supports safe and equitable travel for all residents.⁸

Taking into consideration WDG Public Health's comments, Grand Valley revised their policy for existing road and intersection improvement assessments to assess for and improve road safety for all users (e.g., pedestrian and cyclist safety criteria).

Accessible Communities

A community is accessible when it is designed with a complete communities approach. Complete communities strive to create neighbourhoods that meet the daily needs of residents no matter where they live, work and play by offering diverse housing options, green spaces, safe active transportation and opportunities for recreation. Such communities are convenient, safe and welcoming. Applying this approach to land use planning can support the physical and mental health of residents, foster social connectedness, promote active travel and generate positive economic impacts for local businesses.⁹

The Grand Valley official plan demonstrates a strong commitment to building accessible and inclusive communities. In response to input from WDG Public Health, the plan encourages new residential development and community infrastructure (e.g., public spaces and outdoor amenity areas) to be designed to meet the needs of residents of all ages and abilities (e.g., accessible seating and playgrounds).

Climate Resilient Communities

Planning communities that integrate climate adaptation strategies can help mitigate the impacts of climate change, particularly for vulnerable populations. This includes strategies that address the impacts of extreme heat, poor air quality, flooding and the transmission of vector-borne diseases. Incorporating a climate mitigation and adaptation lens into land use planning can ensure that new developments are resilient to climate-related risks and reduce future costs associated with recovery efforts.¹⁰

The Town of Grand Valley incorporated several climate adaptation strategies into its official plan in alignment with WDG Public Health recommendations. For example, the Town plans to prevent vector-borne diseases through stormwater management practices that reduce the potential for standing water.

Natural Environments

Preserving natural environments and developing communities that integrate green spaces and make them accessible to residents can support positive resident mental health and physical activity while sustaining a healthy environment.¹ Grand Valley's official plan is committed to establishing an open space and park system and protecting natural features from land use impacts.

Grand Valley incorporated feedback from WDG Public Health and strengthened its efforts to protect natural environments by identifying natural feature preservation as a key plan objective, encouraging design standards that enhance access to parks, trails and open spaces, and encouraging street trees in subdivision developments.

Supporting Healthy Food Systems

Communities that support all residents to access affordable, safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate foods reduce health inequities and support positive health outcomes. Protecting agricultural lands and supporting community food initiatives contribute to food security and increased accessibility of healthy foods.¹¹

Grand Valley applied healthy food system components to both small and large-scale agriculture uses in their official plan. This included permitting community gardens on urban residential lands and establishing new objectives for prime agriculture lands to protect and strengthen the local food system in support of food security.

Health Equity Implications

WDG Public Health applies an equity-based approach to its land use planning commentary by considering the needs of those who experience greater barriers to health and well-being. This includes residents who are disproportionately affected by socio-economic inequities and environmental stressors such as older adults, children, individuals living with disabilities, and low-income households. WDG Public Health supports efforts to reduce health disparities by recommending measures such as streetscape improvements that increase tree canopy and road safety to encourage active transportation, opportunities for small-scale urban agriculture such as community gardens to improve access to healthy foods, public transit expansion to locations frequently accessed by priority populations and the provision of accessible seating in public spaces. Through this approach, WDG Public Health strives to support the development of equitable and complete communities that improve the health and well-being of people of all ages and abilities.

Conclusion

The way communities are designed has a significant impact on the health and well-being of residents. For example, communities that provide safe and convenient walking routes to everyday destinations can encourage physical activity and support overall health. WDG Public Health supports municipal partners in their efforts to design complete communities through consultations, land use planning policy development and community collaboratives.

Recently, WDG Public Health concentrated its efforts on strengthening built environment partnerships with municipalities by building connections across municipal programming departments and specialties, being added to land use planning circulation lists, and collaborating on key planning projects. As a result, the number of land use planning requests completed by WDG Public Health in 2025 nearly doubled from 2024.

WDG Public Health will continue to support local municipal partners and planning departments to design communities that are inclusive, age-friendly and promote positive public health outcomes. This will be achieved by continuing to provide evidence-informed recommendations on municipal land use planning policies and projects for which several opportunities are already underway in 2026.

Ontario Public Health Standards

Foundational Standards

- Population Health Assessment
- Health Equity
- Effective Public Health Practice
- Emergency Management

Program Standards

- Chronic Disease Prevention and Well-Being
- Food Safety
- Healthy Environments
- Healthy Growth and Development
- Immunization
- Infectious and Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control
- Safe Water
- School Health
- Substance Use and Injury Prevention

2024-2028 WDGPH Strategic Goals

More details about these strategic goals can be found in [WDGPH's 2024-2028 Strategic Plan](#).

- Improve health outcomes
- Focus on children's health
- Build strong partnerships
- Innovate our programs and services
- Lead the way toward a sustainable Public Health system

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