



# Creating Active Rural Communities



## Problem

There are many challenges unique to creating active communities in rural places, and yet there is very little literature or research to guide a community that pursues this goal. Some of the obstacles a rural community faces include large distances between destinations (20 km/12 miles or more); a prevalent “car culture”; an extensive road network and a small tax base, so that the focus on transportation is to maintain existing roads for cars, rather than to create or improve walking or cycling infrastructure; and limited capacity or expertise within municipal governments (staff and elected representatives) to make planning for active communities a priority.

## Background

Haliburton County is a large rural area located about 220 km (137 miles) north of Toronto, Ontario. The landscape is largely made up of lakes and forest with large tracts of government land. It is over 4,500 square km (1,737 square miles) in size and takes about an hour to cross east/west or north/south. The county has a year-round population of about 17,000 which expands to approximately 65,000 during the summer months with cottagers. Two main villages, Minden and Haliburton, located about 24 km (15 miles) apart, are the hubs of most social and economic activity.

Different sectors in the community recognized that adding walking and bicycling to the local planning agenda would require initiative from interested citizens and organizations. Late in 2004, the Communities in Action Committee (CIA) formed to begin promotion and planning for active transportation. In 2005 the Haliburton Highlands Cycling Coalition (HHCC) was formed to advocate and plan for bicycling.

Both coalitions have a combination of volunteer and professional representation:

- Administration for the CIA is managed by the Haliburton County Community Co-operative, a non-profit group that is structured so that its members can start new projects and initiatives that interest them and benefit the community. Through various provincial and foundation grants, the CIA has been able to hire a part-time project coordinator who has been integral to the project’s success.
- The Haliburton, Kawartha, Pine Ridge District Health Unit, which covers three different counties, is the administrative parent of the HHCC. Two staff from the Health Unit sit on the HHCC; other members are volunteers and cyclists. These staff members have also been able to dedicate work time towards initiatives of the HHCC, which has provided valuable continuity and leadership to the work.

Both the CIA and HHCC have two main goals: to advocate for active transportation and cycling at the municipal level, and to promote both broadly throughout the community.

## Solution

### PARTNERSHIPS

Bringing stakeholders into the coalitions helped to raise public and political awareness of active transportation and cycling. Between the CIA and HHCC, sectors represented on the committees include public health, tourism, economic development, trails, community-based research, transportation planning, municipal recreation and community development. Other important stakeholders such as school districts and municipal governments are provided with regular updates and opportunities for input.

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## PLANNING

Both the CIA and HHCC worked with consultants to develop plans and used those plans as advocacy tools and action strategies with municipal governments. The CIA completed an Active Transportation Plan for Minden. The HHCC completed a Cycling Master Plan for Haliburton County.

Advocacy

Both coalitions emphasize long-term advocacy with decision makers as the key to seeing their plans come to fruition. The coalitions understood that much of the implementation, particularly around physical infrastructure, requires leadership from and partnership with local governments.

## PROMOTION

Promotion of active transportation messages to the public focused on village hubs and promoted a doable message. The “Park the Car and Get Movin’!” campaign encouraged people to park their cars in free parking areas and walk to do their errands when they are in town. The HHCC approached promotion by holding events. Each May/June a series of bicycling workshops and rides are organized to encourage people to get out and bicycle, culminating in a Cycling Festival in June to bring people together to celebrate bicycling with fun events and activities for the whole family.



The Shifting Gears Cycling Festival offers local cyclists of all ages an opportunity to get together and celebrate cycling. Participants in 2007 get ready to ride 1km through Haliburton village.

## SMALL-TOWN OPPORTUNITIES

One of the greatest opportunities in a rural community is its small-town nature. Key individuals wear many different hats, so when someone joins a coalition under one official hat, his or her other affiliations may also benefit the group. For example, one of the trail representatives on the CIA is also the county roads engineer. He is very generous about sharing his professional expertise and insights into the planning process even though he is there in a different capacity.

“The medium is the message” holds true in a small community, where prominent community members who are early adopters catch the attention of everyday people. Prominent people are easily identified, and word of mouth is one of the most effective ways to get a message out. For example, a local radio host was seen parking her car in a public parking lot and walking half a kilometer (about one-third mile) to work. Of course everyone knew her car and asked her why she was doing this. She promoted the message, “Park the Car & Get Movin’!” this way, as well as by talking about it on her weekly show. As more people express their values by walking (and cycling) the talk, they send a message to local politicians which can influence decision making.

## Result

The work of both coalitions is ongoing. Successful advocacy to make active transportation and bicycling a planning priority takes time, with success measured in small steps. The past three years have brought these specific achievements:

For more information, please visit the Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center Web site at [www.walkinginfo.org](http://www.walkinginfo.org).



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- Municipalities purchased and installed bike racks, and provided in-kind support to install active transportation signs.
- Four municipalities hosted events for the World Record Walk in October 2007, which demonstrated their interest in promoting walking.
- Increased interest and engagement from municipal and county councils and staff, through participation in workshops and community forums hosted by the CIA and HHCC. In 2007 the Minden council adopted the International Charter for Walking.
- Municipalities have contributed funding for two important trail projects in Haliburton and Minden; these trails are key active transportation corridors.
- Financial contribution from local councils towards the 2008 Cycling Festival.
- A successful letter-writing campaign to the county advocating for paved shoulders on an upcoming road reconstruction project.
- Increased public participation in the annual cycling festival and workshops.
- A particularly important intangible success is the social development that continues to happen through both projects. New networks and partnerships form when people volunteer at or attend events or participate in focus groups. This process builds human capacity in the community for future planning and advocacy work.

In addition, these projects have raised awareness about the benefits of healthy active living. As a result, many people are making changes to incorporate daily physical activity into their lives. While no evaluation has been done, more people have been observed walking, cycling and participating in activities such as the commuter challenge to get to work actively.

## Cost

The overall budget for the CIA to date has been about \$104,520, with in-kind contributions valued at about \$40,000. The HHCC's budget has been about \$47,000, with in-kind contributions valued at about \$15,000. The in-kind donations covered a range of expenses, including staff time, administration, facility and equipment use, map printing, sign installation, and many hours of volunteer time.

Both the CIA and HHCC have successfully applied for funding from local, provincial and national sources. A large portion of money came from provincial and federal government grants. Local government has contributed to the cycling festival. Non-governmental organizations that promote health and safety (Heart and Stroke foundation, Safe Kids Canada, Health for Life) have also provided funds.



The Municipality of Dysart, et al., provided in-kind support to install four of these sign kiosks in Haliburton Village, to encourage people to park their cars and walk in town. Kiosks themselves were donated by Haliburton Forest, and the signs provided by the CIA. Similar signs will be put up in three places in Minden.

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## Web sites

Communities in Action: <http://haliburtoninaction.r8.org>

Haliburton Highlands Cycling Coalition: [www.cyclehaliburton.ca](http://www.cyclehaliburton.ca)

## Contact

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## *Image sources*

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