Introduction

Greetings Mr Chair and Committee members, and thank you for this opportunity to address you on an urgent matter.

Our message to you is simple: Walking is the wonder drug of the 21st century, the penicillin of the obesity epidemic. No other intervention has the potential at a population scale to have a greater or more lasting impact on obesity. No other intervention is so affordable, with so many wonderful co-benefits.

If walking were a pill, we’d be scrambling to give everyone a prescription. We urge this Committee to identify walking as a priority response to obesity and to support actions to restore a culture of everyday walking in this country. I’ll take a few minutes to explain.

Background

By way of introduction, Green Communities Canada, founded 1995, is a national organization that promotes positive action with benefits for economy, environment, infrastructure and health. Our innovative programs address priorities like energy efficiency, private well stewardship, restoration of the urban water cycle, and much more.

Walking has been a major focus for us since the mid-90s, driven by the vision and persistence of Jacky Kennedy, director of our Canada Walks division. Canada Walks is the only national
entity almost exclusively focused on walking. With our partners, we have been leaders in reversing decades of neglect and putting walking on the map.

Our vision is a nation where everybody can enjoyably, easily and safely walk to school, work, play, shopping and transit. This is about everyday utilitarian walking, not just recreation.

Our work raises awareness, inspires and celebrates success, builds skills and knowledge, and brings together a multitude of partners from many sectors with one common purpose: to create a culture of walking in Canada.

Over the past two decades we have
- introduced and supported Active & Safe Routes to School across Canada, which led to the development of a Canadian School Travel Planning model which has been widely implemented in every P/T. STP is a comprehensive community-based approach that places its focus on children’s mobility, using the daily school journey to develop and implement strategies to encourage active school travel. See: [www.saferoutestoschool.ca](http://www.saferoutestoschool.ca)
- brought the international Walk21 conference to Canada for the first time (Toronto 2007)
- won the Guinness World Record for the largest number of people walking 1 kilometre at the same time
- delivered walkability workshops to 50+ communities across Canada
- launched the WALK Friendly Communities designation program, with eight designations to date in Ontario and plans to go Canada-wide. See [www.walkfriendly.ca](http://www.walkfriendly.ca).
- provided countless resources and maintained a high profile online presence. See [www.canadawalks.ca](http://www.canadawalks.ca) and our social media.

**Why walking should headline Canada’s obesity strategy**

We believe walking must be at the heart of Canada’s obesity strategy. Here’s why:
- Walking is already the most popular activity among Canadian adults. We can build on that.
- Almost everybody can walk, anywhere, any time. It’s free - there’s no need for a club membership or expensive equipment.
- Walking can be integrated into our everyday lives, which makes it a persistent habit, from youth to old age.
Walking is the perfect starter activity for a sedentary population and a “gateway drug” to more demanding activities.

**Health benefits of walking**

The documented health benefits of regular walking (a half hour a day for adults, and hour for youth) are awe-inspiring. Walking:

- burns more fat than jogging
- improves heart health and blood pressure
- reduces glaucoma risks
- limits colon cancer
- halves the odds of catching a cold
- helps cut new cases of diabetes in half and manage existing cases

Regular walking also makes us happier, improves mental fitness (including school performance), and even helps with sexual dysfunction.

Finally, walking helps to stave off age-related disability by maintaining muscle strength, balance and healthy bones - something for us all to think about as we head toward our 70s and 80s. Regular walking is a proven effective preventive measure for maintaining mobility and independence.

**Creating a culture of walking - a walking strategy**

So, how are we going to get Canadians walking? Part of the answer will be a broad-based communications campaign - something like, “Get Healthy, Get Happy, Get Walking.” Healthcare professionals need to understand the benefits and prescribe the walking life. Communities need to promote walking through festivals, street closings, and campaigns. Youth need to develop a life-long walking habit through effective school travel planning instead of getting hooked on motorized transportation by well-meaning adults.

**Creating walk-friendly communities**

But more is needed. Over the past decades communities have been designed and built to make cars happy, which means that walking has been engineered out of our lives. Communities need to become more walk friendly - places where everyday walking is safe, convenient, and attractive. Communities need features like lively and pleasing streets, connected walking routes,
convenient crossings, pedestrian safety measures and enforcement, and mixed use development so that destinations are accessible by foot.

Experience shows that walkability initiatives can quickly begin to attract growing pedestrian traffic. Walkability works!

**Benefits of walkable neighbourhoods**

Walkable neighbourhoods are healthier neighbourhoods, as documented in diabetes research by Toronto’s St. Michael’s Hospital. Walkable neighbourhoods are safer, and more socially cohesive. Air quality is improved; and transit works better. Finally, walkability is linked to higher real estate values and retail sales. Workplaces in walkable neighbourhoods are better able to attract the employees they seek.

**Summary and recommendations**

In conclusion, walking is the wonder drug of the 21st century, with a long list of benefits. Walking is a lifelong activity that most of us can weave into the fabric of our everyday lives. Income is not a barrier. Further, we know how to create sustained improvements in walking rates by creating walk friendly communities, with health, social, environmental, and economic dividends.

We therefore urge this Committee to incorporate the following into its findings:

1. Walking and walkability should be a top priority for Canada’s national obesity strategy, with an ambitious national target, e.g., doubling of routine walking by 2025. This should be incorporated into the action plan associated with National Health and Fitness Day.
2. Federal funds should be invested in walking infrastructure to celebrate Canada’s 150th birthday in 2017.
3. The federal government should support a high profile promotional campaign, and participate in a pan-Canadian collaborative to implement a Canadian Walking Strategy.

On this last point, we are inspired by the example of the Every Body Walk Campaign in the U.S., coordinated by America Walks. Canada needs an effective multi-partner collaborative voice like Every Body Walks to issue a call to action and accelerate progress. Walking has legs. Now is the time to seize the opportunity and pick up the pace. Now is the time to make a walkolution. We urge you to help make it happen.
That concludes my prepared remarks. We would be pleased to work with you to provide further detail. Thanks very much for your attention.

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