Age-Friendly Built Environment: Examining the Downtown Core of the City of Kingston, Ontario.

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Executive Summary

There is a growing need to develop age-friendly communities to meet the challenges seniors face when they age. With the aging population in Canada, the

proportion of individuals aged 65 and older is growing faster than any other age cohort (Statistics Canada). In 2005, the World Health Organization introduced the concept of age-friendly cities to encourage cities to become more age-friendly (WHO, 2007). It is based on the concept of active aging which refers to a city/community adapting its environment, services and policies to allow for individuals to fully participate in their community, socially, physically and economically at all stages of life (ibid). While recognizing the great diversity among people in various chronological age categories, for this report, "seniors" or "older people" are defined as age 65 and over.

Since 2012, the City of Kingston has been engaged in the age-friendly community planning process (City of Kingston, 2012). The physical environment has a significant impact on the independence and quality of life of its residents, therefore the built environment is a noteworthy component of what constitutes an age-friendly city. While physical environment is only one of the eight age-friendly dimensions established by the WHO, this report's objective is to evaluate the downtown core of the City of Kingston in terms of the built environment. Research data was collected by conducting a walkability audit and using an age-friendly checklist guided by WHO principles.

Older adults can be particularly vulnerable to the environments in which they live. Mobility limitations for instance can create unique challenges in crossing a busy intersection, or dealing with cracked sidewalks, or entering a building that can only be accessed by steps (Menec et al, 2011). Creating and preserving walkable communities also maintains improved public health and quality of life (Kerr et al, 2012). The built environment and creating walkable spaces can allow for changes that are needed to promote independence and physical activity for older adults, generating a higher quality of life and aid the City of Kingston towards becoming more age-friendly. To tap into the potential that older people

represent for continued human development, cities must ensure their inclusion and full access to urban spaces, structures and services (Plouffe et al, 2010).

The report findings suggest that some aspects of the downtown core are age-friendly such as outdoor seating, several sections of sidewalks and intersections. Maps for each area are used to demonstrate the problem areas identified by the researcher in the findings section. The researcher also provides recommendations for areas that might need improvement to become more age-friendly. The City meets WHO age-friendly standards regarding green spaces and lighting. In the study area, Coronation Park is identified to be an excellent green space, with many benches. Additionally, the City of Kingston does a good job with and street signs for seniors. The City of Kingston however does not meet WHO age-friendly standards regarding age-friendly curb cuts and push buttons to help facilitate seniors crossing from one side of the road to the other. Furthermore, while the City does have adequate sidewalks and crosswalks, many are in poor condition.

Recommendations provided in the report are separated into two categories; specific recommendations stemming from this report and general recommendations to improve the city's overall age-friendliness. Specific recommendations include maintaining and improving sidewalks, crosswalks, curb cuts as well as installing audible traffic count times and push buttons in addition to creating an inventory of benches. General recommendations consist of looking at other policies and programs that encourage walkability, promote accessibility, understand the importance of urban design, and improving greenery and public space.

Since older adults are an increasing proportion of the population, the demand for good walkable places is likely to grow significantly among this age cohort. This means that the demand for retrofitting our communities to adapt to the needs of this aging cohort is also a priority. Planners should be prepared to respond with solutions that alter the environment and will make designations

safely accessible on foot for this rapidly growing segment of the population (Kerr et al, 2012). This research highlights creating an age-friendly community by evaluating the links between older adult's well-being and the built environment.