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East Preston Active Transportation Project

In July 2021, a funding announcement from three levels of government was met with great enthusiasm in East Preston and beyond as a new 1.3km active transportation trail has been given the green light. The trail will connect the daycare and recreation centre and provide much needed safe, accessible, active transportation in the area.

RNS caught up with a few people involved in the journey to learn how they got to this point, what this achievement means, and what still needs to be done. We wanted to hear from people who have been a part of the process so far, understand the unique challenges that they faced and to raise awareness within the recreation community of this positive story.

Figure 1: Taken from East Preston The 7 Video

Background

For decades, the historical Black community of East Preston has been looking to overcome the challenges faced by poor infrastructure making active transportation unsafe. Consistently overlooked over the years, a 70 km/h speed limit coupled with no crosswalks or sidewalks made it unsafe to get around the community without using a car.

Without safe opportunities to walk and bike within the community it becomes harder for residents in a rural area to be physically active and easier to feel socially isolated.

A committee formed in 2017 after a few like-minded individuals from a variety of organisations connected at a Healthy Halifax Communities stakeholder meeting on access to physical activity in rural communities. This led to the Rural Access to Physical Activity (RAPA) – East Preston Action Team who moved to engage the residents of East Preston in taking part in a walkabout to rate how safe and friendly the infrastructure in their community was and identify any infrastructure aspects that needed work, and eventually create an Active Transportation (AT) Plan for East Preston.

The RAPA East Preston Action Team includes representatives from a wide range of organisations such as United Way Halifax, Nova Scotia Health Authority (Public Health - Central Zone), Dartmouth and Southeastern Community Health Boards, East Preston Day Care and Family Resource Centre, Active Transportation and Physical Activity advocates and consultants, as well as municipal and provincial government.

Key Milestones

The group were able to secure funding from Nova Scotia Department of Energy and Mines in 2018 with matching funding from the local councillor to create an Active Transportation (AT) Plan for East Preston. The East Preston AT plan meant the community was able to more easily advocate for specific changes. In particular, to request that HRM consider incorporating the recommendations into HRM's AT plan and that the necessary funding contributions be prioritized at the municipal level.

In 2019, a Walkability Grant via Recreation Nova Scotia allowed the group to commission a videographer to create a five minute video capturing the unique challenges faced by the community.

In making the video, the group interviewed lots of community members which helped people reflect on the ongoing challenges. It is a powerful video which we strongly encourage you to **watch**.

This video was primarily to be used as an advocacy tool and was ultimately very instrumental to highlight the challenges East Preston faced and show HRM staff and council (among others) how crucial it is for more funding to be directed to Active Transportation in the community and how urgent that is, in terms of equity.

Challenges Along the Way

Navigating the different levels of government can be tricky, so having a range of individuals and organizations with different expertise and lived experience around the table is helpful.

Another challenge in making progress was community support. Some individuals interviewed have been lobbying for decades for these changes, so asking people to join another committee or commit time to support is hard – people are tired of advocating for these changes and seeing little progress. The group was able to engage enough people continually to help build trust and to see that headway is being made. It makes a difference to see tangible change, because this helps keep the momentum.

Recent Milestones

Early last summer, after getting the East Preston AT plan incorporated into the plan of Halifax Regional Municipality, the RAPA team began to work on building more capacity in the community. The **East Preston AT Committee**, a group of residents representing a wide range of people in the community (including youth, seniors, church groups, the Ratepayers, the Recreation Centre, etc) who had originally been called to provide input on the development of the EP AT Plan and only played an advisory role to that point, was ready to grow and take on the lead to ensure that the recommendations that had been made on the Plan were implemented.

Aside from the basic infrastructure improvements made on the Plan (such as a sidewalk along highway 7, paved shoulders and a handful of crosswalks and accessible bus stops), one of the key recommendations made in the Plan was that of reducing the speed limit in the community.

In April 2021, after many years of advocating for it, the East Preston AT Committee managed to persuade the province to reduce the speed from 70 km/h to 50 km/h along the highway, as it was done in Lake Echo, over 40 years ago.

The community is very hopeful and excited – some even sharing photos of the new signs on social media.

However, there is still a long way to go. Using the changed speed limit as an example, drivers who are accustomed to 70 km/h (or higher) may not necessarily adjust to the new limit right away. And there's also still a need for improved crosswalks, bus stops and service.

But there is hope that more changes are coming and the announcement of funding for the 1.3km active transportation pathway is a big step. Construction is set to begin in the Summer 2022. This AT route will connect the East Preston Day Care and Family Resource Centre with the Recreation Centre. The biggest benefits? The opportunity for people to stay active in the community. People of all ages are sometimes forced to travel to Halifax or to others places in HRM to ride their bike or walk with their friends. This new pathway will provide a pleasant place to stay active in East Preston, safe and connected. Plus, it has the potential to make a big difference to the physical, mental and emotional health of residents.

Additionally, it's an opportunity to instill cultural pride. With over 400 years of history in East Preston the residents can use the trail to include educational plaques about the history of the community.

Eventually, the plan is to extend the trail past the Day Care and Rec centre route out to the edge of Lake Echo and further to Cherry Brook.

Acknowledgements

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Links:

Find more information, contact details, and documents from East Preston Active Transportation Committee and the Rural Access to Physical Activity Group here: https://www.eastprestondaycare.ca/daycare-events/

Project Presentation (Sept 2021) – Transportation Association of Canada (TAC) – Equity Considerations in Planning for Active Transportation Sept 2021: https://drive.google.com/file/d/119OJwVNcZn8_wbdf9KXFWII-F3mih3v_A/view

Press Coverage & News Releases:

- Provincial Government Funding Announcement (July 2021): https://novascotia.ca/news/release/?id=20210716007
- Federal Government Funding Announcement (July 2021): https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/investing-in-safer-and-more-convenient-active-transportation-infrastructure-818422528.html
- CBC Article – East Preston wants help to make community safer for pedestrians (December 2019): https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/east-preston-pedestrian-safety-1.5404357

Please note: All pictures have been taken from East Preston 'The 7' video.