

The Grand Concourse: An Integrated Walkway System

Organization

Grand Concourse Authority

Status

Started 1989, ongoing

Overview

The Grand Concourse is a 120-kilometre integrated system of walkways and amenities linking every large park, river, pond and greenspace in the City of St. John's and the neighbouring City of Mount Pearl and Town of Paradise, in the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

The Grand Concourse offers safe, comfortable, attractive and accessible routes for pedestrians, cyclists and other active transportation users. Its 37 interconnected walks include comprehensive wayfinding and interpretive information, rest areas and playgrounds. The walks are designed to link major destinations like schools, seniors' homes and parks, and are planned to offer easy access by public transit.

The Grand Concourse Authority, a non-profit organization established through provincial legislation, develops and manages the Grand Concourse. The Authority's members, on whose lands the walks are situated, include all levels of government, institutions, foundations, commissions and other local authorities.

The Authority continuously monitors the walkway's use and impacts. Grand Concourse users, of whom there are about 38,000 on an average summer day, are estimated to spend more than \$20 million per year on fixed or incidental items related to their use of the walkway. There is widespread public knowledge and appreciation of the Grand Concourse and its benefits for the community.

The Grand Concourse Authority has made its extensive technical knowledge, standards and practical experience available to other groups

through a comprehensive Maintenance Management System.

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Resources

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Community context

The City of St. John's (population 100,000) and the neighbouring communities of the City of Mount Pearl (population 26,000) and the Town of Paradise (population 11,000) are situated at Canada's easternmost point, an area home to the oldest European settlement in North America.

The St. John's region exhibits a relatively dispersed and low-density development pattern. As in many smaller cities, its residents are largely reliant on cars to meet their daily travel needs – fewer than 5% take transit to work, while 6% walk and fewer than 1% cycle. The region is known for its hilly terrain and wet weather – two factors that are commonly cited as disincentives to active transportation modes like walking and cycling.

Policy context

Reflecting the key dual challenges of climate and terrain, the City of St. John's offers limited programs to support sustainable and active transportation modes. Metrobus, the local transit system, is the focus of municipal efforts to provide and promote an alternative to driving for area residents.

The Grand Concourse has been developed to enhance this municipal context for active

transportation. The system serves primarily recreational walkers and cyclists, but as it grows and links destinations more effectively it is more likely to serve utilitarian transportation purposes.



The Grand Concourse offers barrier-free access, wherever possible

Rationale and objectives

Put simply, the vision of the Grand Concourse is to be a “walker’s paradise.” The walkway is intended to encourage public health through physical activity, and to encourage residents and visitors to experience the natural and historic beauty of the St. John’s region.

Actions

Creation and mandate

The initiative behind the Grand Concourse sprang largely from the persistence and generosity of a single benefactor, the Johnson Family Foundation. In 1989, the Foundation sponsored a Lookout Project that included a new promenade, upgraded walks and interpretation on Signal Hill, a National Historic Site above the entrance to St. John’s Harbour. That project’s success demonstrated the need for further walks to connect local attractions, and additional studies were begun.

The first Grand Concourse walk opened in 1993 as one of several demonstration projects intended to illustrate the Grand Concourse’s potential and attract member organizations.

In 1995, the Newfoundland legislature passed an *Act to Incorporate the Grand Concourse Authority* which stated, “The purpose of the Authority is to foster, promote and enable the design, development and operation, by or for the members,

of an integrated network of walkways and amenities on land owned or occupied by the Members, to be known as the Grand Concourse.” The legislation also gave the Authority the power to prepare a master plan, establish priorities for Grand Concourse development, develop criteria for conservation and enhancement, and conduct any required scientific, environmental, economic, tourism and cultural studies.

One aspect of Newfoundland law that has been a key factor in developing the Grand Concourse is the *Newfoundland Lands Act* that places in the public realm all lands within 15 metres of waterways. This has enabled walkway continuity along and around rivers, ponds and coastlines.



A map of the Grand Concourse walkways

Planning and development

The Grand Concourse Authority has placed considerable emphasis on developing safe, comfortable and attractive walks using prescribed standards. It relies on professional expertise, particularly that of landscape architects, at all stages of planning and design, and makes public participation an integral part of the planning process. Concept plans are presented to the public, reviewed and refined before construction begins.

The Grand Concourse walkways are designed for use by pedestrians foremost, but cycling is also permitted along the Newfoundland T’Railway, a converted railway line that serves as a major link between St. John’s, Mount Pearl and Paradise. The Authority strives to make its walkways accessible to persons in wheelchairs wherever possible, and special attention is paid to create safe crossings where trails intersect with the existing road network.



“Before” and “after” photos of an at-grade intersection of the Newfoundland T’Railway and a local road

Wayfinding

The Grand Concourse Authority takes a comprehensive approach to wayfinding in order to promote use by area visitor and residents. Along the walkways themselves, there are identification signs to guide users and as well as interpretive storyboard panels that offer maps and descriptions of each route, and highlight key features like rest areas.

The award-winning *Walker’s Handbook* is a 148-page interpretive guide to the walkways of the Grand Concourse. It includes detailed maps and full-colour photographs of all 37 walks in the system, information on the length, duration and grades of walks, notes on common wildflowers, shrubs and birds, and histories of prominent buildings and places.



A Grand Concourse walkway marker



An interpretive storyboard panel

Links with destinations and other modes

In planning the Grand Concourse, special attention has been paid to the locations of “people generators” like schools, hospitals, seniors’ homes, parks and other recreational facilities. Most area schools are situated close to a walkway.

The Grand Concourse has parking areas to enable access, but is also well integrated with Metrobus, the area transit system. The ability of transit users to easily connect with Grand Concourse walks has been an important consideration.

Maintenance

The Grand Concourse Authority has created a Maintenance Management System intended to help agencies and groups in other communities maintain their own walkway or greenspace systems. The system has three main elements:

- **Walkway maintenance manual**
This collection of concise “how-to” articles includes bulleted instructions, color photographs, and detailed diagrams that explain how to maintain walks, trails and related amenities like benches, stairways and retaining walls. Recommended standards and frequencies of operation are given for each procedure. The manual is printed on tear-proof and water-resistant sheets that can be easily removed and taken into the field. It can be purchased through the Authority’s website at www.grandconcourse.ca.
- **Maintenance impact statements**
These summarize the cost and level of effort associated with each maintenance task. A full list of equipment and materials is presented to help plan and sustain a proper maintenance system.

▪ Construction drawings

Diagrams that show how each element of the Grand Concourse was laid out give insight into planning, building and maintaining any walkway system.

Monitoring

The Grand Concourse Authority continuously monitors the use and impacts of its walkway system. Some results of these monitoring activities are discussed in the next section.



Technologists use GPS technology to maintain an inventory of walkway features

Results

An estimated 38,000 local residents use the Grand Concourse on an average summer day. In a 2002 telephone survey of area residents, nearly 85% of respondents said they use it at least once a week during the summer months.

Respondents also overwhelmingly recognized the value of the walkways. In the 2002 survey, a majority of area residents gave the walkway's benefits at least three points out of five in the areas of public health (98% of respondents), environment (92%), property values (81%) and local businesses (70%). As well, 97% of respondents rated the Concourse positively for its scenery and attractiveness, and 90% gave it high marks for cleanliness and maintenance.

Research estimates indicate that the Grand Concourse is stimulating sustained consumer spending of more than \$20 million per year. Even though the average user does not spend a great deal during each outing, the sheer volume of users results in a considerable economic impact. Walkway users (including local residents and tourists) are estimated to spend over \$7.8 million

annually on incidental expenditures like refreshments, film and sunscreen. User purchases of "fixed" items like walkway-related footwear, clothing, health foods, vitamins and walker's handbooks are estimated to add another \$12.5 million annually.

In 2003, the Grand Concourse Authority won a National Honour Award from the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects for the overall planning, design and construction of the Grand Concourse. The Johnson Family Foundation was also given a Regional Award of Merit for its *Walker's Handbook*.



Surveys of Grand Concourse users are conducted regularly

Participants

The Grand Concourse Authority is a non-profit organization. Its Directors and members include community-based and government organizations including the Johnson Family Foundation, the federal and provincial governments, area municipalities, Memorial University, St. John's Port Authority and other local foundations and commissions.

Resources

The Grand Concourse Authority estimates that the cost of developing its granular walks has been in the order of \$33 to \$60 per square metre, and that the annual cost of maintaining them is in the order of \$2,000 to \$2,500 per linear kilometre. Details on the level of maintenance can be found in their walkway maintenance manual.

Ongoing financial support for the Grand Concourse Authority is provided by:

- Johnson Family Foundation
- Human Resources and Skills Development Canada
- Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency
- Government of Newfoundland and Labrador
- City of St. John's
- City of Mount Pearl
- Town of Paradise

Timeline

1989 Signal Hill Lookout project

1993-1994 Demonstration projects

1995 Passing of an *Act to Incorporate the Grand Concourse Authority*

1997 First historic interpretation panel erected

2001 Creation of GIS inventory of walkway features

Lessons learned

Key lessons learned include:

- An insistence on high standards and professional design pays off in an improved user experience.
- Demonstration projects can be effective in showing project potential and attracting partners.
- Public participation is a vital part of the planning process.
- Partnerships with community, government and business groups are key to successful processes and outcomes.
- Integration with public transit helps many users get to and from the walkway.
- Connecting with major generators for youth and seniors helps attract users.
- New technologies (e.g. GPS-based inventory for maintenance management) can be effective and efficient.
- Constant monitoring of usage and impacts helps to identify benefits for the community, environment and economy.

Next steps

The Grand Concourse Authority currently focuses on maintaining its walks, building new links to the walkway network at the request of members, managing landscape development projects, and greening the walks to reduce mowing, enhance beauty and biodiversity, and combat climate change.

Another ongoing task of primary concern is to market the Grand Concourse and promote its use as a means of improving public health and enhancing economic development and quality of life in the St. John's region.

Images are courtesy the Grand Concourse Authority