



## WALK TORONTO COMMENTS ON SUBURBAN SIDEWALK CYCLING

To: Mayor Tory and members of Toronto Council  
From: Steering Committee, Walk Toronto  
Re: Cycling Network Plan Update IE6.11 (Toronto Council meeting, July 16, 2019)  
Date: July. 15, 2019

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*Walk Toronto is a grassroots pedestrian advocacy group that works with various levels of government, community groups and citizens to improve walking conditions and safety in Toronto*

### BACKGROUND

At the June 27, 2019, meeting of the Infrastructure and Environment Committee, it was suggested that the most suitable candidates for a pilot project to test the legalizing of sidewalk cycling are arterials located in the suburbs, where pedestrian volumes are typically much lower than in the downtown. Lawrence Ave. was singled out as an appropriate example of such a road. Out of this discussion came Recommendation 19, which is the focus of our comments:

*City Council direct the General Manager, Transportation Services to develop a pilot project to allow bike traffic on sidewalks, for example where there is a high volume of car traffic and few pedestrians and report back by the fourth quarter of 2020 on the merits of allowing cyclists on designated sidewalks.*

### SUMMARY OF WALK TORONTO'S POSITION

**Recommendation 19 is couched in low-key language which implies that the proposed study is for a pragmatic, low-cost alternative to building bike lanes. In contrast, Walk Toronto sees legalized sidewalk cycling as:**

- **Worsening conflicts on sidewalks between pedestrians and cyclists**
- **Creating fear in the pedestrian community, and discouraging walking on affected sidewalks**
- **Having serious, hidden public health costs**

**From the safety perspective, investing in protected cycling infrastructure will achieve higher safety levels (for both cyclists and pedestrians). But in the future this may be difficult to do if a study on multi-use sidewalks leads to the legal enshrining of sidewalk riding.**

**We suggest that Recommendation 19 be deleted from the Cycling Network Plan Update, and that the funds which would have been spent on the study instead be used to build useful infrastructure on roads that lack bike lanes or sidewalks.**

## **CYCLING CONDITIONS**

Walk Toronto recognizes that the majority of the arterial roads in Toronto do not have dedicated cycling facilities. Because the actual operating speeds on many arterials are in excess of 60 km/hr, cyclists put their lives in danger when they ride on these roadways with motor vehicles. We sympathize with bike riders who decide to take refuge on sidewalks in order to distance themselves from dangerous vehicular traffic. However, **cycling on sidewalks introduces a new set of collision risks for both cyclists and pedestrians. Walk Toronto therefore recommends the building of protected bike lanes and cycle tracks as the real solution to dangerous cycling conditions on Toronto's roads.** This needs to be done on an expedited basis.

## **WALKING CONDITIONS**

It is the goal of Walk Toronto to help bring about an increase in rates of walking throughout the entirety of Toronto; this applies to the suburbs just as much as the downtown. The City of Toronto (in several policies including the Official Plan) has also committed to a similar transportation mode objective of encouraging walking and discouraging single occupant vehicle use. One of the means of achieving this is by making the pedestrian environment safer, more attractive and more convenient for walking. On the other hand, we feel that **legalizing bicycle riding on sidewalks – a seemingly pragmatic solution – will actually be counterproductive, making sidewalks less safe, attractive and convenient for pedestrians.**

**It should be noted that concerns about cyclists on sidewalks are one of the most commonly heard complaints from pedestrians in Toronto, especially from seniors. Allowing cycling on sidewalks is likely to lead to both anger and to a discouraging of walking among seniors, as well as other vulnerable pedestrians.**

## **CONUNDRUM**

With dozens of pedestrians dying each year in Toronto's hostile road environments, it's not unreasonable to hope that our sidewalks can eventually become treated as an almost 'sacrosanct' zone. This is a somewhat absolute aspiration. In the here and now, **we would be satisfied if sidewalks can function like concrete 'ribbons' which offer pedestrians a haven that is reasonably safe.** There are differences of opinion as to what extent we should be willing to share our haven with cyclists. We agree with the City's policy<sup>1</sup> that children 13-years-

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<sup>1</sup> City of Toronto webpage: "Cycling & the Law". <https://www.toronto.ca/services-payments/streets-parking-transportation/cycling-in-toronto/cycling-and-the-law/>

old or younger should be able to legally ride their bicycles on sidewalks (even though this can sometimes be nuisance).

But the issue is more complicated in regard to adult cyclists. Toronto has fallen far behind other cities such as Montreal and New York in rolling out a connected, city-wide network of bicycle facilities that are safe for riders of all ages and abilities. Until Toronto catches up, some pedestrian advocates are willing to quietly tolerate adults who cycle on the sidewalks of dangerous suburban arterials that lack safe bike infrastructure. On a crazy thoroughfare such as Don Mills Rd., we don't want to see the police ticketing a seventy-year-old cyclist who has taken refuge on the sidewalk. Of course, we have mixed feelings and a certain amount of misgiving when it comes to the unofficial sharing of our sidewalk havens. But it's the charitable thing to do, and for now we are not calling on the police to strictly enforce the current law that prohibits adults from riding on sidewalks when it comes to dangerous suburban roads. However, we feel that it is vital that this remains the formal legal standard, in order to avoid confusion, and make it clear that it is not a good solution and that the necessary long-term goal is separate, safe facilities for both pedestrians and cyclists.

We must emphasize that **in the longterm the onus should be on the City to make active transportation free of major conflicts. To achieve this goal, there is one point about which we are absolutely certain: we do not want to see adult sidewalk cycling on designated arterials enshrined in law.**

### **MULTI-USE PATHS ARE NOT A GOOD MODEL**

Some proponents of legalizing sidewalk cycling point out that in Toronto we already have a precedent in multi-use paths, which are shared by cyclists, walkers, dogs, runners and boarders. This may be so, but it is a problematic compromise. **We frequently hear of conflicts on multi-use paths and trails.**<sup>2</sup> Imagine a professional dog-walker managing several dogs passing a cargo bike that is carrying small children. As a rule of thumb, the path width must be at least 4 metres in order for conflicts between trail users to be minimized.

Few if any sidewalks in the city meet this safety standard. It must be understood that at present many sidewalk cyclists are aware that they are engaged in an illegal activity and as a result they choose to ride slowly and cautiously on sidewalks. However, if the City legalizes this option, then it is likely that cyclists will ride faster on sidewalks, notwithstanding any posted signs warning them to go slowly.

### **STAGNATION DANGER**

Sidewalk cycling may seem like a cheap and easy solution. In reality, legalizing sidewalk cycling will solidify the status quo on roads monopolized by motor vehicles. We reiterate that on 2.1 metre sidewalks, active transportation users will be crowded into a narrow space creating conflicts. We anticipate that if a pilot project leads to the extensive legalizing of sidewalk cycling, there would be several other consequences:

- Pedestrian traffic volumes would probably stagnate on designated sidewalks

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<sup>2</sup> See for example [https://www.thestar.com/yourtoronto/the\\_fixer/2019/07/10/jogger-says-more-bollards-needed-on-lower-don-trail-not-fewer.html](https://www.thestar.com/yourtoronto/the_fixer/2019/07/10/jogger-says-more-bollards-needed-on-lower-don-trail-not-fewer.html)

- The ease and low cost associated with putting up “bikes allowed” signs on sidewalks could be addictive for staff and politicians alike. Decision-makers who believe that cyclists belong on sidewalks would be disinclined to approve of building new bike lanes
- Likewise, motorists who believe that cyclists ‘have their place’ on the sidewalk would be less accepting of bikes on the roadway, and some would dangerously buzz cyclists who choose to ride in traffic lanes
- Cyclists who become accustomed to riding quickly on designated sidewalks would be more likely to ride on busier sidewalks where bike riding is still prohibited — in turn, buzzing pedestrians.

In short, **we believe that legalizing some sidewalks for cycling will chiefly benefit motorists and will result in a stagnation of active transportation on roads so designated.**

## SUBURBAN FACTORS

There is very little dedicated on-street bicycle infrastructure in the half of Toronto that is situated north of Eglinton Ave. This sorry state of affairs may never change if Recommendation 19 eventually leads to the development of a network of multi-use sidewalks in the suburbs that would compare badly to the bike lane network that is coming to fruition downtown.

This imbalance would mirror current complaints that suburbs such as Scarborough have received less than their fair share of high order transit. Walking and cycling are vital components of our transit system, allowing many users to travel the ‘first and last mile’. Providing a top quality environment for active transportation is a prerequisite for improving transit in the suburbs. It doesn’t make sense to spend billions of dollars on new transit infrastructure and then skimp with sidewalks and bike lanes that should feed into transit routes

## PRECEDENTS IN THE 905 REGION

Admittedly, multi-use sidewalks have been implemented in various municipalities just north of Toronto, such as Richmond Hill, Vaughan, Aurora and King.<sup>3</sup> They are less populous and have much lower densities than Toronto, which has become the fourth largest metropolis on the continent. In fact, our suburbs have a higher number of high-rise buildings than is the norm in other large North American cities. Moreover, our outer suburbs are now situated in the geographic heart of the GTA. **If we want to adopt an appropriate model for our suburban sidewalks, we should be looking at cities of comparable size. Large cities such as Montreal and Vancouver are investing in high quality active transportation infrastructure, rather than opening up their sidewalks to cyclists.**

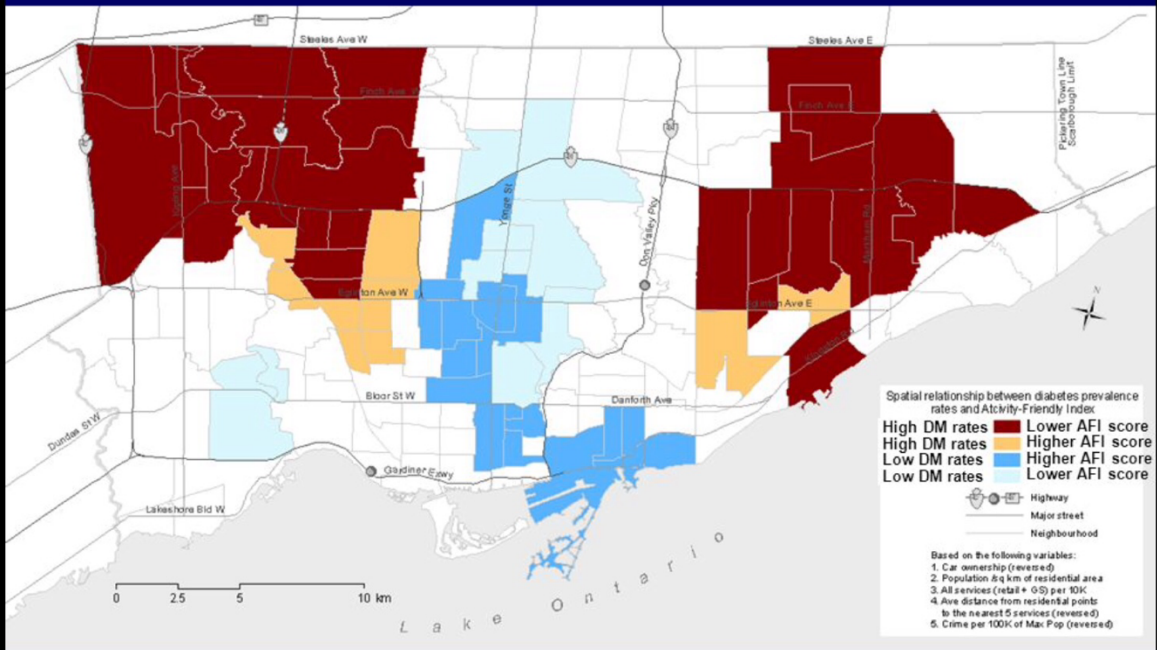
## PUBLIC HEALTH

At Walk Toronto, we view poor sidewalk usage in a neighbourhood as a cause for concern because public health studies associate low walking rates with higher incidence of non-communicable disease. Let us take diabetes as an example. A study conducted by St. Michael’s Hospital established a clear correlation between high rates of diabetes and car-reliant suburban neighbourhoods where residents’ physical activity levels are low.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> “Brian Dexter: Cyclists get on the Sidewalk!” *National Post*, Jan.22, 2005. <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/brian-dexter-cyclists-get-on-the-sidewalks>

<sup>4</sup> “Diabetes in Toronto: Where You Live Makes a Difference”, Rick Glazier (CRICH, Oct. 2, 2007) Slide 22. <https://slideplayer.com/slide/6378222/>

## Diabetes & Activity Friendly Neighbourhoods



### Neighbourhood Environments and Resources for Healthy Living: A Focus on Diabetes in Toronto

Recommendation 19 refers specifically to sidewalks with “few pedestrians”. (Many would be located in the high diabetes rate zones coloured red on the above map.) The status quo is taken as a given, and is used as a rationale for a multi-use compromise which is likely to perpetuate stagnant levels of walking and cycling.

We believe that the ethical course of action is precisely the opposite. To improve the well-being of suburbanites we must make neighbourhoods in the non-blue areas of the map more friendly to active lifestyles by building bike lanes and reducing conflicts in sidewalk environments.