



April 16, 2020

Office of the Mayor
Toronto City Hall
100 Queen Street West
Toronto, Ontario
M5H 2N2

Dear Mayor Tory,

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. During this difficult time, we strongly believe that well-considered measures are necessary to protect pedestrians in congested urban areas as we all seek to practice safe physical distancing.

We support proposals for temporary pedestrian and cycling infrastructure endorsed by Ryerson University professors and epidemiologists Anne Harris and Linda Rothman, and by Councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam, who represents the city's most densely populated ward. In particular, we note that a balanced approach is possible: the goal of physical distancing can be facilitated by a "network of lane closures (including parking lanes) in high density parts of the city ... and need not entail complete closure of any streets."

Though many of us have the luxury of working or studying from home, there are still tens of thousands of Torontonians who must commute to essential workplaces, including health care centres, food production facilities, distribution centres, grocery stores and pharmacies, and transportation hubs. Many more of us must access essential services, food retailers, and pharmacies. Short walks are also essential for pet owners and for maintaining mental health. Providing safe walking and cycling routes is especially important during this pandemic because a shift to using active transportation will take the pressure off of transit operations. With fewer riders, the TTC will be able to successfully implement physical distancing measures.

In dense urban neighbourhoods, keeping within the recommended two-metre distance from other people when outside has become difficult, if not impossible. Many sidewalks – even on busy arterials – provide less than two metres' width, with many pedestrians opting to take to the

active roadway. Other barriers, such as poles, construction scaffolding and fencing, and transit shelters, leave little room to manoeuvre. Toronto's homeless people – who have no way to “stay at home” and who have now lost access to indoor spaces such as libraries, community centres, and shopping malls – are sheltering in the doorsteps of storefronts that have temporarily closed and making use of public sidewalks.

When pedestrians are forced into the roadway to maintain physical distancing, the danger they face from motor vehicles is captured in one of the City's own news releases from April 15, 2020, which stated, “While the City has seen a dramatic drop in traffic volumes, Toronto Police report that from March 15 to March 31, there was a 35 per cent increase in speeding tickets and an almost 200 per cent increase in stunt driving compared to the same period last year.”

Other cities in Canada, including Vancouver, Montreal, and Kitchener, have announced or implemented solutions to improve pedestrian safety during the pandemic, including closing streets to motor traffic, creating temporary sidewalk extensions, changing traffic signal length, or disabling “beg buttons” so that walk signals appear automatically. In Brampton, lanes on two collector roads are being closed to create five kilometres of temporary bike lanes.

With businesses closed, no patios to linger at, and no festival programming, pedestrians will not be attracted to linger and crowd sidewalks in dense urban neighbourhoods. However, expanded walking space will enable people to get to work safely on foot, access essential services, exercise the dog, or get some fresh air, without having coming into overly close contact with other people.

The alternative solution that was mentioned in a recent television interview – implementing and enforcing one-way sidewalks — would be extremely difficult to enforce. It would only increase the distance pedestrians would have to walk to get to work or essential services. It would go against centuries of practice, and it would encourage less-safe midblock crossings. It would be especially cumbersome for seniors and pedestrians with disabilities. Simply put, one-way sidewalks would expose pedestrians to more danger and add additional hardship on the most vulnerable.

While Toronto continues to drag its heels on providing safe spaces for its residents to walk and bike while being physically distant, its peer cities — and even one of its suburbs — are leading the way. It is time for Toronto to step up.

Sincerely,

Sean Marshall
On behalf of Walk Toronto

CC: Dr. Eileen de Villa