



To: Councillor McKelvie (Chair), and members of the Infrastructure and Environment Committee
From: Walk Toronto (Steering Committee)
Date: Oct. 25, 2021
Re: IE25.11 (Improving Winter Access to Toronto's Parks for 2021-22)

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.

WALK TORONTO'S SUPPORT FOR STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS

Walk Toronto urges members of the Infrastructure and Environment Committee to support all of the recommendations in the report from the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation (Oct. 6, 2021).

These include expanding winter maintenance within the current standards, resulting in the clearing of 334 km of pathways, trails and park roads. Also welcome is the opening of five additional public washrooms and the pilot project for environmentally sensitive areas. We are confident that these measures will have the potential to play a substantial role in improving the physical and psychological health and safety of Toronto's residents, at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic is entering a second stressful winter period.

SPECIAL COVID-RELATED PROGRAMS

Walk Toronto is grateful to Council and staff for rolling out the ActiveTO and CurbTO programs in the warmer months of the year 2021. As winter approaches, some of these programs' measures will come to an end. In addition, we thank the City for making progress in expanding the scope of sidewalk snow clearing for the 2021-22 winter. Complementing these on-street improvements is the optimization of the Toronto's green space for walking and hiking in colder conditions. Staff's proposal to continue to clear an increased number of park paths and trails helps to fulfill this goal and **will provide a seamless travel experience for people who will be able to walk or roll along properly maintained on-street sidewalks and then proceed within many parks on similarly well maintained park paths and trails.**

HEALTH ISSUES

There is now a consensus amongst public health authorities that the risk of COVID-19 transmission is generally far lower in an outdoors environment compared to crowded indoor conditions. All of the above-noted measures implemented by the City over the last year are helping Torontonians gain physically distanced access to the outdoors that is generally safer than exercise alternatives available at venues such as fitness clubs and gyms.

Staff's commitment to providing access to an increased number of public washrooms and portable toilets in the 2021-22 winter season is a boon during the pandemic because washroom access is still reduced for non-patrons

at many restaurants and buildings of various types. It often isn't mentioned, but public washrooms are a key amenity for pedestrians and the health of their bladders.

ACCESSIBILITY & SENIORS ISSUES

For a senior, a person with a disability or an individual with balance problems, neglected park paths and trails can make walking and rolling in green space problematic during the winter. Uncleared snow means they often cannot even enter a park, let alone enjoy its interior. We see unfortunate situations in which grandparents are unable to play with their grandchildren in the local park.

In the past, this has deterred many people with physical challenges from spending much time outdoors in the colder months. Many live on fixed incomes, and this can restrict their recreational options during the winter. Also, from the transportation perspective, some park paths and trails can offer direct routes and shortcuts; if snow accumulations make them impassable, seniors and people with disabilities may be forced to make challenging detours. Even worse, failure to make outdoor walking routes accessible can result in some of these Torontonians becoming shut-ins during the winter (especially if they do not have access to automobiles). Typically, they may have to wait until around March break before they can regain decent access to green space.

In the disability and 65+ communities, lack of exercise and insufficient exposure to nature, sunlight and fresh air are problems that can result in negative health outcomes. This is true during normal conditions as well as in the pandemic. During the last winter, the City demonstrated that it has been able to successfully increase levels of winter maintenance in green space. The improvements have made walking and rolling easier. Aside from benefits to physical health, exposure to nature generates a psychological uplift that sets into motion a virtuous circle. **It is clear that there are sound reasons for continuing to make green space accessible after the pandemic has ended.**

ESSENTIAL WORKERS AND SOCIAL EQUITY

While COVID-19 was raging, essential workers have been lauded as heroes. They have been selflessly accepting increased exposure risk to the SARS-CoV-2 pathogen. Many essential workers live in the suburbs. Especially in neighbourhood improvement areas, they may not be able to afford ski club memberships, high-end home gyms, holidays in southern resorts, or a personal automobile. Using Toronto's parks, on the other hand, is an affordable, green option for fitness and recreation. Maintaining the principal paths and trails in parks throughout the winter is one way the City can thank essential workers and make their lives less difficult.

As vaccination levels increase, we should not allow ourselves to become complacent and slip back into taking essential workers for granted. Essential workers will continue in the years ahead to provide Torontonians with important services at jobs that are often poorly paid and physically demanding; so too, the City should continue in the years ahead to provide them with green space that is useable throughout the winter.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

We expect that the Covid-19 pandemic will be receding over the next year. However, that does not mean that Torontonians will no longer be facing a crisis during the winter of 2022-2023. **We will still be gripped by the climate emergency.** The decisions being made by Council should reflect the necessity to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This involves accepting that Toronto is a 'winter city': we should be encouraging residents to stay in town and to enjoy the city's assets — including our parks and trails — in colder conditions. The snowbird alternative is to indulge in flights to southern destinations that have a high carbon footprint. This is sometimes accompanied by ownership of a second residence and a second automobile in warm locations that increase personal carbon footprints even more.

From a responsible, environmental perspective, making key trails, important parks and public toilets useable, accessible, safe and pleasant during the winter months is something that the City should be undertaking on a permanent basis.

WALK TORONTO RECOMMENDATION

We note that the PF&R 2021-2030 capital budget includes enhancements to parks washroom buildings. But on the operational side, winter maintenance of park paths and trails, as well as winter access to a greater number of public toilets, are being considered mostly as one-off measures for two winter seasons (2020-21; 2021-22). Temporary funding has been found through provisions of Section 37 and 42. Also, we assume that some money budgeted for PF&R's recreation programs that have been cancelled because of the pandemic has instead been allocated to the above-noted winter access measures.

Moving forward, **we recommend that Council request staff to study winter mobility patterns in parks, as well as the costs, funding sources, staffing, and environmental ramifications of providing winter maintenance for green space and improved public toilet access on an ongoing, permanent basis — rather than as just one-off responses to the pandemic.**

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