



Walk Toronto Comments on IEC 12.14 Right-turns-on-red in Toronto

To: Members of the Infrastructure and Environment Committee
 From: Walk Toronto (Steering Committee)
 Date: March 10, 2020

Walk Toronto is a grassroots, volunteer pedestrian advocacy group that works to improve walking conditions and pedestrian safety in Toronto.

Walk Toronto believes that proactively using right-turns-on-red prohibitions across the entire city would save lives, and that this is a sensible measure under Vision Zero. Allowing drivers to turn right on a red light creates a particularly dangerous environment for vulnerable road users, especially people who are blind or have a visual impairment, children and seniors.

In Toronto, the third most common type of collision is when a motor vehicle turns right while the pedestrian was crossing with the right of way at intersection: 13% of pedestrian injuries or fatalities were the result of right-turning vehicles between 2008 and 2012.¹

For right turns on red to work properly, all humans involved need to behave in a very particular way, with no room for error. Unfortunately, the safety of pedestrians who have the right of way is compromised by this practice: drivers turn right into the pedestrian's path, while assessing the space available between cars traveling at full speed. Although drivers must make a complete stop before turning, as mandated by the Highway Traffic Act, they don't always do. Moreover, it is not possible to be able to look at both sides of the road at the same time: as drivers look left for a gap in traffic, they are more likely to strike a pedestrian or bicyclist crossing on their right. This means that vulnerable road users are not safe when they have the legal right of way. Right turns on red are especially problematic for pedestrians who are blind, and for children who are taught that it is safe to cross when the pedestrian has a green light. A blind person relying on the audible signal has no way of knowing when a vehicle is about to cross their path, and a child may not understand that they need to double check before they cross.

Right on red in practice means that the right of way that pedestrians are supposed to have is compromised and that the sense of security that the pedestrian greenlight provides is false. One of the authors of this submission and a member of the steering committee of Walk Toronto is totally blind and gets around with her guide dog. She always crosses at the light, with the accessible pedestrian signal. She has experienced many instances of

¹ <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2015/hl/bgrd/backgroundfile-81601.pdf>



drivers making right turns suddenly appearing in her path and speeding in front of her. Fortunately, her guide dog has pulled her back, while the driver continued on their path.

Right on red prohibitions are needed to ensure the effectiveness of leading pedestrian interval signals in Toronto. One of the problems with the new leading pedestrian interval signals at many intersections is that while they are intended to provide additional safety for pedestrians, letting them enter the intersection first, allowing right turns on red reduces their effectiveness. In Montreal, where RTORs are prohibited across the island, the leading pedestrian signal is far more effective.

In a context in which distracted driving has significantly increased due to the prevalence of mobile devices (including GPS and wayfinding applications inside cars), continuing the car-centric policy of allowing right turns on red is a recipe for disaster. Other large cities in North America such as New York and Montreal have implemented a city-wide ban on right turns on red. Banning turning right on red in Toronto would make intersections safer for pedestrians.

Vision Zero recognizes that humans make mistakes, and aims to minimize the consequences of those mistakes. Vision Zero does not rely on human behaviour to keep the roads safe. Rather, it designs conflict out of the system, through infrastructure changes and legislation. Banning motor vehicle right turns on red in Toronto would reduce opportunities for conflicts between drivers and pedestrians and thus prioritize the safety of vulnerable road users.

Eliminating right turns on red only at selected locations is problematic in terms of predictability: some vulnerable road users will have difficulty determining what rules are in place at a particular intersection; a child might not be adept at interpreting signage, and blind people would not know if an intersection allows right turns on red.

A citywide or neighborhood ban of right on red would eliminate the cost of creating, installing, maintaining, and replacing prohibition signs at each intersection. Moreover, too many signs result in cluttering the roads with a visual overload, which may distract drivers attention from watching out for dangers on the road.

Walk Toronto supports reducing the number of intersections that allow right turns on red. However, we see this as just the first step. If Toronto Council is truly committed to the principles of Vision Zero — and if it is serious about following the example of peer cities such as Montreal and New York — then it will enact a city-wide, blanket prohibition of right turns on red.

Daniella Levy-Pinto and Sean Marshall
On behalf of the Steering Committee of Walk Toronto