



To: Councillor Pasternak (Chair), and members of the Infrastructure and Environment Committee
From: Walk Toronto (Steering Committee)
Date: Nov. 4, 2020
Re: IE17.7 (Clearing the Path Towards a Safe and Accessible Winter)

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.

WINTER MAINTENANCE PROGRAM REVIEW

Councillors Matlow and Layton are requesting an update for the Winter Maintenance Program Review, which was considered by your committee on Oct. 17, 2019 (IE8.6) ¹. We will refrain from repeating many observations about the staff report and HDR consultant report released over a year ago, since Walk Toronto issued comments at that time.² Our main conclusion was that these reports represented “**only the first step**, and that the goal should be a safe and reliable network for all, including those who get around using active transportation.”

The aim of our present comments is to:

- A. communicate our views about the request for an update made in Motion IE17.7;
- B. discuss the issues dealt with by the original 2019 review in the new context of the COVID-19 crisis; and
- C. examine the 2019 review within the longer perspective of discussions over the last decade about sidewalk snow clearing harmonization.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Walk Toronto urges members of the Infrastructure and Environment Committee to support all of the recommendations in Motion IE17.7. These 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 stressful winter period. The recommendations will also help rectify various inequities in the provision of winter maintenance services that have negatively affected the City of Toronto since amalgamation, more than twenty years ago. This is a win-win situation, as the benefits will accrue to the public at minimal net expense to the taxpayer.

¹ <http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2019.IE8.6>

² Oct. 16, 2019 <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2019/ie/comm/communicationfile-97921.pdf>

PHYSICAL HEALTH ISSUES

There is now a consensus amongst public health experts that the risk of COVID-19 transmission is generally far lower in an outdoors environment compared to crowded indoor conditions. As a result, many youths who attend school will be getting less exercise in indoor facilities such as gymnasiums, not to speak of students who are now being schooled at home. Likewise, even though the City of Toronto is allowing fitness clubs and gyms to reopen later this month, many cautious adults will seek alternatives for safe physical exercise where the risk of exposure to viral pathogens is minimized. Some of the best outdoor options are walking, running, hiking or cycling. Unsurprisingly, the rates of all have increased since the pandemic began. In order to facilitate these activities, it is clear that the City should be properly maintaining throughout the winter all of its sidewalks and bike lanes, as well as the most heavily used park paths and trails that function as linear parks.

Walk Toronto is grateful to Council and staff for rolling out the ActiveTO and CurbTO programs. As the winter approaches, some of these programs' measures will come to an end, and we must set our sights on optimizing the city for active transportation in colder conditions. In years past, snow clearing levels of service have varied wildly throughout the city, which has deterred many residents from spending much time outdoors in the colder months, and resulted in slip and falls and other accidents that have injured those who do seek physical activity on Toronto's streets and in its parks. It is not sufficient to encourage outdoors exercise; the City must also ensure that maintenance standards applied to pedestrian (and cycling) infrastructure are at a consistently high level throughout the city.

PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH ISSUES DURING THE PANDEMIC

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has, of course, put an even dearer premium on safety. It seems likely that public health authorities will expect Torontonians to adhere to physical distancing guidelines throughout the winter. This will increase the amount of time that we spend at home, with some people — especially seniors — isolating themselves to the point of being shut in. This can lead to depression and other types of psychological distress. Younger adults who are working or studying from home, not to speak of the unemployed, are also vulnerable to psychological collateral damage caused by physical distancing and isolation.

This can be ameliorated by going outdoors and obtaining not just physical exercise but also exposure to nature, sunlight, fresh air, and other people (at a two-metre distance). Walking, hiking, running or cycling outdoors can generate a psychological uplift that sets into motion a virtuous circle, which in turn strengthens our immunity levels, resulting in better outcomes for those people who are exposed to COVID-19.

ACCESSIBILITY & SENIORS ISSUES

In the older areas of Toronto, responsibility for clearing snow from sidewalks of many residential streets currently rests with property owners. On every street, there are almost always a few individuals who have been remiss in their duty, resulting in sections of the sidewalk where snow and ice have accumulated. For an able-bodied youth, this generally is just an inconvenience. But for a senior, a person with a disability or an individual with balance problems, neglected sidewalk maintenance can make walking and rolling problematic in the extreme. The weakest link in the chain principle applies here: for vulnerable pedestrians, uncleared snow and ice accumulations can constitute a barrier as impassable as a brick wall.

It is sometimes claimed that the City's Seniors & Disabled Persons Services program (which provides free snow clearing service for seniors and people with disabilities) is a sort of panacea. It is not. As we mentioned a year ago, the sole purpose of this program is to maintain sidewalks abutting the property of those people who are not capable of doing it themselves. It does not ensure that sidewalks are passable beyond the property boundaries of the individuals enrolled in the program. If neighbours fail to keep nearby sections of the sidewalk

clear, then seniors and people with disabilities can be boxed in, unable to walk around their neighbourhood. This can result in their becoming shut-ins during the winter if they do not have access to automobiles.

It should also be noted that many seniors who ordinarily would spend the winter in southern locales are now staying put in Toronto because of the pandemic. ‘Grounded snow birds’ are increasing the number of elderly Torontonians who want to walk safely within their neighbourhoods.

GEOGRAPHIC AND SOCIAL EQUITY

Since amalgamation, the City has provided free winter maintenance for suburban sidewalks — whereas in many older sections of the city this service is off-loaded onto local property owners (who can be fined if they fail to comply with official standards). This is fundamentally inequitable, and the disparity is magnified by the fact that the City spends less on sidewalk winter maintenance precisely in those parts of the city where pedestrian volumes are highest.

Also, a study done on snow shovelling in Quebec about four years ago³ examined major snowfalls that occurred between 1981 and 2014. It found that a snowfall of 20 centimetres increases the odds of being hospitalized by 16%, and of dying from a heart attack by 34%. It would be much fairer to harmonize the City’s snow clearing policies, and extend mechanical plowing to all of central Toronto in order to decrease the risk to residents of coronary events. As a society, we should not be making mandatory an activity that is known to be dangerous. Shifting the responsibility to professional operators using power equipment will reduce visits to hospital ICUs during a time when their beds should be prioritized for handling COVID-19 patients — a consideration also relevant to reducing slip and fall accidents, which can send an even greater number of victims to emergency rooms and lead to life-shortening hip fractures.

Geographic equity also works in reverse. 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, are an affordable option for fitness and recreation. Maintaining the principal walkways in parks throughout the winter is one way the City can thank essential workers and make their lives less difficult.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

We applaud the motion’s recommendation for “a snow clearing plan for all paved pedestrian and cycling pathways in Toronto’s parks”. We assume that such a plan excludes trails in deep, environmentally sensitive ravines. However, we would like to see included so-called ‘linear parks’ that are located on flat tableland. Already, the West Toronto Railpath receives winter maintenance. We suggest that this service be extended to similar major linear parks across the city such as the Meadoway, the York Beltline Trail, the Finch Hydro Corridor Trail and the Lower Don Trail. Plowing paved trails on semi-industrial, decommissioned rail lines and hydro corridors presents far fewer environmental concerns than is the case with deep ravines — yet it offers opportunities for extended outings that provide the kind of recreational and fitness benefits that are difficult to obtain in small neighbourhood parkettes.

³ “The cold, hard facts: Increased risk of heart attacks after snowstorms, study finds”. The National Post, Feb. 13, 2017. <https://nationalpost.com/health/heavy-snowfall-increases-risk-of-heart-attack-study-says>

Toronto's snow clearing methods include the use of dry salt, which is detrimental to the water table, rivers, Lake Ontario, vehicles, wildlife, the health of trees and vegetation. It is even destructive of human footwear and can be troublesome for dogs' paws too. We suggest that, wherever feasible, the City use liquid brine treatments or — better still — other compounds that are less damaging than dry salt.

SIDEWALK SOLUTIONS

It is often suggested that easiest way to fix the status quo is to implement better enforcement procedures in order to reduce the number of property owners who do not comply with current sidewalk maintenance by-laws. A Transportation Services staff report of Oct. 27, 2015⁴ looked into the ramifications of increased levels of enforcement and provided many pertinent details. If the current complaints-based system were replaced by proactive patrolling of the 95,500 properties subject to owner sidewalk clearing requirements, it would be necessary to double or triple the existing complement of 10 Transportation Standards Officers — who would be spending an average of 7 to 10 hours per enforcement action, each of which can take weeks to resolve. Walk Toronto suggests that rather than paying salaries for up to 30 enforcement officers, the City would be better off spending the money on the mechanical plowing of sidewalks. This would get the job done right in a timely way, rather than setting off a series of remedial actions that could involve significant delays. Another advantage of mechanical plowing performed by City crews, compared to manual snow clearing by individual property owners, is that the former results in a continuous cleared path that is seamless at property boundaries. This makes it easier for wheeled devices to negotiate.

Over the years, Transportation Services staff have contended that physical constraints prevent their crews from mechanically clearing sidewalks in what we informally call the 'no-plow zone', namely, streets in the older parts of the city that lack boulevards, are too narrow, suffer from obstructions, and/or are hemmed in by on-street vehicle parking. The HDR report goes into great detail, laying out the criteria for plowing, identifying difficulties, expatiating on the finer points of levels of service, and making suggestions for the specifications of a pilot project.

At Walk Toronto, we believe that a pilot project is not really necessary, because Transportation Services has **already** accumulated much experience and expertise in mechanically plowing older streets with various physical constraints. In a previous submission⁵, we noted that City plows the majority of the residential streets north of Danforth Ave., yet requires homeowners to shovel sidewalks on streets in the no-plow zone, south of the Danforth. **Streetscape design and conditions in both areas are quite similar!** The principal difference is that winter operations standards for streets north of the Danforth were grandparented⁶ from East York, which, pre-amalgamation, provided higher levels of service for sidewalk clearing than the old City of Toronto, whose practices were perpetuated south of Danforth Ave. It is also noted that equipment testing will prioritize locations that are part of the senior sidewalk clearing program. Again, we are of the view that testing is not necessary because it has long been obvious that seniors require all of the sidewalks in their entire neighbourhood to be adequately maintained.

In our 2019 report, Walk Toronto found methodological faults with HDR's review of 6 peer cities, 4 of which were cherry-picked in the USA (which has a tradition of using private initiative to carry out services). We were able to identify a dozen cities in Ontario and another 6 outside the province which assume responsibility for

⁴ "Clearing of Snow from Sidewalks – Current Processes and Future Considerations". Walk Toronto report, April 8, 2014 <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2015/pw/bgrd/backgroundfile-85337.pdf>

⁵ "Walk Toronto Submission on Sidewalk Winter Maintenance – PW31.1", May 3, 2014 <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B2Dhk-NkQO3QWHJtNUJRNIRXZHc/view?usp=drivesdk>

⁶ <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2014/pw/bgrd/backgroundfile-68156.pdf>

residential sidewalk plowing. None of these are mentioned in the HDR report, an omission which gives an inaccurate and lopsided assessment of the level of government involvement in winter maintenance programs across Canada. HDR does examine the practices of Ottawa and Montreal. This adds another two cities to our list of 18. We recommend that Toronto follow the example of these metropolises, which are closer in population size to Toronto than the others. Although both receive higher seasonal snowfall amounts than Toronto, their governments manage to clear their sidewalks without offloading the burden onto property owners. They do this by using narrow blade snow plows, snow blowers, snow melting equipment and protocols that prohibit on-street parking when plowing operations are being undertaken.

FINANCIAL FACTORS

However, if Toronto's Transportation Services staff find it impossible to emulate the example of peer cities, then there exists a last resort: the department can despatch crews to hand-shovel problematic sidewalks that it does not want to plow (because of physical space constraints, or other reasons). The aforementioned 2015 staff report estimates that the costs of manual clearing could be as high as \$9,900,000. This figure lies in the middle of the estimates provided in the HDR report ⁷ which range from \$7,642,836 for employing contract labour to \$10,878,050 for in-house labour. The latter figure should be seen as the upper limit of manual snow clearing costs. To the extent that mechanical methods can be employed, costs logically will go down.

The HDR report ⁸ also notes high maintenance standards do not just require clearing snow from the pedestrian clearway — it may also be necessary to physically remove substantial accumulations of snow after successive heavy snowfalls. Removal costs for the 1,400 km. of unplowed streets are estimated to be \$13,292,031 for full snow removal; and \$6,646,015 for partial removal. We suspect that these amounts are excessive, because we rarely see snow removal operations in the area north of Danforth Ave.

In 2014, Walk Toronto issued a report which calculated the costs for clearing and removing snow on a per capita basis. We found that, **even if Toronto were to pay an additional \$10,000,000 to cover snow clearing on 1,100 km. of sidewalks that the city did not maintain at the time, the costs would work out to \$36.59 per centimetre annual snowfall per capita. In comparison, Montreal and Ottawa were both paying about \$44 per centimetre annual snowfall per capita, a figure that includes snow clearing AND removal. The conclusion is obvious: if our peer cities can afford comprehensive, harmonized snow clearing and removal so can we.**

Other factors should also be taken into account. The taxpayer is currently footing the bill for many services that would be reduced or eliminated by harmonization of the sidewalk clearing policies:

- **The present Seniors Assistance Program would be rendered redundant**, since the service (which is currently provided inefficiently on a selective basis) would be extended to all of Toronto's residential properties using continuous plowing routes that can be organized economically.
- If the by-law that applies to delinquent property owners is rescinded, **there would no longer be any need to employ Transportation Standards Officers** in its enforcement. The salary savings would be significant.
- Better maintained sidewalks would reduce winter slip and fall claims, decreasing settlement payouts by the City of Toronto. "There were nearly 30,000 emergency department visits and 2,800 hospitalizations in the city from residents who fell on snow and ice between 2006 and 2015, according to an October 2016 Toronto Public Health report. **The injuries cost the provincial health care system nearly \$4 million**

⁷ P. 53

⁸ P. 56

a year, the report said, and slips and falls on snow and ice cost the city about \$6.7 million a year due to liability insurance claims.”⁹

The financial logic that applies to on-street routes is also relevant to green space. Linear parks are major pieces of infrastructure with large budgets — for instance, creation of the Meadoway is pegged at \$80 million. Unfortunately, paved trails can freeze over and become dangerous if not properly maintained. Not plowing them in the winter is a false operational economy that results in our not properly exploiting year-round the potential of extremely valuable green space resources. It is tantamount to building a hugely expensive highway and then not plowing it in the winter, to save money.

When accounting for all costs and expenses, Walk Toronto estimates that the net burden on the taxpayer would not be significantly increased by implementation of this motion’s recommendations, compared to other pandemic-related programs such as CERB.

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL COMPETITIVENESS

Toronto is Canada’s financial capital. Our health as a city will be sapped if we allow a hampering of our ability to lure or retain exceptional entrepreneurs, employees and corporate offices. Many gravitate to the central core so that walking to the workplace is possible; by the same token, those who are currently working from home want to be able to walk safely to local amenities, parks and stores. Toronto is competing against cities such as Montreal and Ottawa, and it should be willing to spend as much per capita as they do to ensure that its sidewalks and green spaces are walkable in winter.

We are also competing against Silicon Valley for tech talent. One of California’s great selling points is the consistency warm weather. In Toronto, we can’t abolish our harsh winters — but we can be realistic about our northern location and allocate sufficient resources to managing snow properly. This is what is happening in Scandinavia. Three times as many Swedes were being injured while walking in icy conditions than while driving — and the cost of those injuries was far exceeding the cost of snow clearance.¹⁰ In response to these frightening statistics, Swedes decided to give top priority to snow clearing for pedestrians and cyclists. The lesson is clear for Toronto: **the City should accept responsibility for clearing all of Toronto’s sidewalks and many of our park paths according to a harmonized policy, as set out in the Motion IE17.7 .**

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⁹ “Slips, falls on icy sidewalks in Toronto dangerous, expensive, experts say”. Muriel Draaisma, CBC News, Feb. 13, 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/programs/metromorning/slips-falls-physical-financial-cost-winter-boots-doctor-lawyer-toronto-1.4533066>

¹⁰ “Why Sweden Clears Snow-Covered Walkways Before Roads”. Angie Schmitt, Streetsblog USA, Jan. 24, 2018 <https://usa.streetsblog.org/2018/01/24/why-sweden-clears-walkways-before-roads/>