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Sunday June 12, 2022.

Re: DI 21.5

Dear Toronto Accessibility Advisory Committee Members,

My name is Simone Stock. I am the Vice Chair of Friends of High Park Zoo.

Friends of High Park Zoo (FHPZ) was formed in 2012 initially to raise money and bring awareness that the Zoo was under the threat of closing and now offers fun and educational activities for anyone coming to High Park. With the support of residents around the GTA we were able to raise \$342K which we gave to the city to cover a year and a half of operating costs. We were able to present to City Council a petition with over 30,000 signatures to keep the Zoo open. In 2014 the operating costs were reinstalled into the City Budget. Since then our group of volunteers (we have no paid staff) have hosted many accessible, free, fun events at the Zoo on weekends. We've created activities around Grandparents Day, hosted a Chalk Art Competition, created our own Halloween "Zoo Boo" programming, arranged for a tree harpist to play as well as weekend and statutory holiday programming that draws so many people to the llama pen for our popular and fun activities, all at no cost to visitors.

As a not-for-profit charity we rely on volunteers aging from 15-85 at these events for the community. They are well-attended and appeal to people of all ages, especially low-income persons living in and near the community. Parents drop their children, 15 and up, at the Zoo to volunteer and pick them up after our events. Seniors park in the lot next to the Zoo so that they could enjoy the interaction with the animals and other visitors. We find that the adult volunteers, particularly the seniors, really enjoy meeting the animals and this kind of community engagement is an important part of their mental health. Since the closure of the park roads with the barriers, these people are not coming to the Zoo as they once did.

Since March 2020 the Zoo had been closed for a total of 10 months due to COVID. Since it reopened in mid-June 2021 we have only been able to organize one event for the public due to the park being closed to vehicles on weekends; The Holiday Trees and our Snowflake Walks during the month of December 2021. When we began planning for this event in September 2021, we believed that by December the park would reopen to vehicles as ActiveTO would have finished for the season and the park was no longer needed for social distancing. It turned out we were wrong and the park remains closed having first prohibited vehicles from entering on weekends and statutory holidays in April 2020.

FHPZ does not support the road being closed for the last 2 years on weekends. The barriers have prevented many visitors and volunteers from having access to the park and Zoo. Those with disabilities



and advanced age particularly cannot manage the longer distances to a lot of the amenities. For those on limited income High Park is a place to be able to enjoy nature, gather with friends and family and

have a wonderful day at no cost. The barriers on the entrances have created an impediment to that, the Zoo and our free programming.

The limited parking on neighboring streets is also of concern as the streets bordering High Park are very busy with very few traffic lights for safe crossing. Additionally, limiting access for first responders and emergency vehicles has become a problem as they can also not move through the barriers. Further, the barriers prevent Police from cruising through the Park as a positive community presence, reminding visitors to the Zoo and others in the park, support is never very far if needed.

In December we hosted a month-long Holiday Tree event with 15 trees that were decorated by sponsors. We also organized two Sunday evening "Snowflake Walks" from 5pm-6pm where visitors could walk through the Zoo after dark, to see the decorated Holiday Trees all lit up with festive lights. With the park being closed on weekends we know of families, seniors and volunteers who did not feel comfortable walking through the park after dark, and were forced to stay away. If they had been able to drive or be driven by friends or family into the park, they could have attended this fun event. Having the park closed on weekends has put up barriers for many and yet the City says that its goal is to break down barriers!

In closing, FHPZ prides itself in hosting events accessible to everyone. With the park being closed to vehicles we are simply unable to do this. We therefore do not support the continued road closures on weekends and statutory holidays as this prevents many people from having access to the park and participating in events particularly those near the middle of the park.

We have heard from other organizations that call the park home and provide events and activities (Shakespeare in the Park, baseball, soccer, ball and ice hockey teams, the Off Leash Dog group and the allotment gardeners) that the closures are a burden and source of frustration. Please request that the city opens this public park to everyone not just those who are able to walk in.

Please share my letter with the members of the Toronto Accessibility Committee and the public.

Best regards,

Simone Stock

Vice Chair, Friends of High Park Zoo

