

Car Free High Park
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CarFreeHighPark.org



May 5, 2023

Toronto City Council
Toronto City Hall
100 Queen St. West
Toronto, ON M5H 2N2

Dear Toronto City Councillors,

Re: IE3.7 High Park Movement Strategy

We believe that High Park should become a natural refuge from the stresses of city life – a healthy environment where people can enjoy the park free of motor traffic and the accompanying air pollution, noise, and threat of injury.

Back in 2020, the City of Toronto took the bold step of closing High Park to vehicles on weekends. Three years later and the success of this decision could not be any more clear: the park is as busy as ever on weekends and 75% of people surveyed agree that the road closures have had a positive impact on their experience visiting the park. Only 13% disagreed.¹

That's because the full potential of High Park shines through on car-free days. Families are able to walk comfortably side by side. People with disabilities are free to move beyond the cramped sidewalks. Park users of all ages and abilities are provided more space and can move about comfortably. The road is re-purposed for people walking, jogging, rolling, scooting, and biking. Everyone enjoying the safety, freedom, and peace that a car-free High Park provides. High Park becomes an oasis in the city. A joyous environment that is safe, quiet, and inspires community.

While we appreciate the hard work of city staff to do their due diligence and explore multiple solutions, the majority of park visitors and users surveyed, including the majority of families with young children and park users with disabilities, agree that a car-free High Park will:²

- Make the park safer
- Make the park more accessible
- Improve the park's natural environment

A car-free High Park has encouraged low-carbon modes of travel, such as walking, biking, and taking public transit. High Park is well supported by public transit with 2 subway stops (High Park and Keele), 2 streetcars (501 Queen and 506 College) and a bus (80 Queensway), which drop visitors off at various park entrances. The Bloor Street bike lanes and Martin Goodman Trail provide safe passage to the park for people choosing active modes of transportation. There are also 12 Bike Share stations in and around High Park, totalling over 200 available bikes/docks. A car-free High Park will fully support the City of Toronto's ambitious TransformTO goals.

In a car-free High Park, everyone should have the ability to access park attractions. Our coalition recommends for the provision of a shuttle-bus or shuttle-train system, as has been discussed as part of the High Park Movement Strategy and is commonly found in other car-free parks across the world, to effectively allow those with mobility disabilities to move efficiently from the park's perimeter to the interior attractions. Optimally, this service would run seven days a week during most daylight hours. To enhance accessibility, the coalition recommends improving sidewalk infrastructure in the park, including adding missing sidewalks, to provide ample space for people of all abilities. More benches should also be provided along the main paths to further support seniors and park users with disabilities. The parking lots at Spring Road and Colborne Lodge would be altered to exclusively accessible parking spaces, seniors parking spaces, and families with young children parking spaces, including convenient pick-up and drop-off locations.

High Park, when it is car-free, also serves as a refuge from the threat of road violence. It has allowed children to roam more freely and for persons with disabilities to have one less concern when visiting the park. There are precious few places in the city where people are guaranteed to be safe from the threat of being injured or killed by a reckless or distracted driver. The High Park Movement Strategy outlined that the average speed of vehicles in the park is nearly double that of the 20km/h posted speed limit.³ A car-free High Park will fully support the City of Toronto's Vision Zero goals.

With the city's rapidly growing population, many of whom don't have their own personal outdoor space, the need for more park space can not be understated. Research has shown that green spaces are linked to improved mental health, lower levels of stress and loneliness, reduced rates of depression and anxiety, and improved general well-being.

This is why it is vital we maintain and expand upon one of the few car-free spaces in the city. As New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said when Central Park went permanently car-free back in 2018: *"Our parks are for people, not cars. We are prioritizing the safety and the health of millions of parents, children and visitors who flock to Central Park."*

If a park can't be car-free, then what hope do we have of prioritizing low-carbon modes of transportation, meeting our climate goals, and putting the health and safety of people first?

Closing parks to cars is not a radical idea, but rather a sensible one that is being implemented all around the world, including other parks across Canada, the US, Germany, London, Paris, and many more. It is the logical path forward in today's climate, it is the direction the world is heading in, and it is what the vast majority of people in this city want.

Sincerely,

Car Free High Park

- 8 80 Cities
- Brown + Storey Architects
- CHASE (Canadian Health Association for Sustainability & Equity)
- Community Bikeways (TCBC)
- Cycle Toronto
- David Suzuki Foundation
- Friends and Families for Safe Streets
- Midweek Cycling Club
- No More Noise Toronto
- Parkdale High Park 4 Climate Action

- Park People
- Parks Not Planes
- Roncy Reduces
- Saddle Sisters of High Park
- Safe Parkside
- StopGap Foundation
- The Biking Lawyer LLP
- The Centre for Active Transportation
- Toronto Bike Brigade
- TTCriders
- Walk Toronto

Scott Prudham, Professor, Department of Geography & Planning, School of the Environment, University of Toronto

John Robinson, Professor, Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, School of the Environment, University of Toronto

Stephen Scharper, Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, School of the Environment, University of Toronto, Director, Trinity Sustainability Initiative

Sandy M. Smith, PhD, FRES, Professor, Forest Health, Director, Forestry Programs, Director, Institute of Forestry & Conservation, University of Toronto



¹ According to the High Park Movement Strategy Summer to Fall 2021 public survey: <https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/94e2-high-park-movement-strategy-survey-snapshot-2021.pdf>
² According to the High Park Movement Strategy Summer 2022 public engagement survey and report: <https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/93b9-high-park-movement-strategy-engagement-summary-summer-2022.pdf>
³ According to the High Park Movement Strategy public open house presentation: <https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/94e0-high-park-movement-strategy-open-house-presentation-july-27-2022.pdf>



May 5, 2023

A park for people and the High Park Movement Strategy

WHO WE ARE

We are Car Free High Park, a coalition of 22 organizations ranging from environmental, health, accessibility & disability, sustainability & equity, street safety, urban design, active transportation, and public transit advocacy.

8 80 Cities	David Suzuki Foundation	Saddle Sisters of High Park
Brown + Storey Architects	Friends and Families for Safe Streets	Safe Parkside
Car Free High Park	Midweek Cycling Club	StopGap Foundation
CHASE (Canadian Health Association for Sustainability & Equity)	No More Noise Toronto	The Biking Lawyer LLP
Community Bikeways (TCBC)	Parkdale High Park for Climate Action	The Centre for Active Transportation
Cycle Toronto	Park People	Toronto Bike Brigade
	Parks Not Planes	TTCriders
	Roncy Reduces	Walk Toronto

OBJECTIVES OF A CAR-FREE HIGH PARK

To transform High Park into a natural refuge from the stresses of city life – a healthy environment where people can enjoy the park free of motor traffic and the accompanying air pollution, noise, and threat of injury. Creating a park that is safer, more accessible, and better protects the natural environment and wide array of wildlife that call it home.

WHY A CAR-FREE HIGH PARK IS NEEDED

We are living through a climate emergency, through a struggle for street safety, through the challenges that come with a growing population, limited green space, and the ever increasing importance of protecting and preserving what is left of the natural environment around us. These are goals the City of Toronto has set for our future:

- **TransformTO** - City of Toronto's climate action/emissions reduction strategy launched back in 2017, and accelerated in 2019 when City Council unanimously declared we are in a climate emergency. To quote the City of Toronto: "Achieving the targets set out in TransformTO will require transformational changes in how we live, work, build and commute."
- **VisionZero** - City of Toronto's road safety plan launched in 2016 with a focus on significantly reducing traffic-related injuries and deaths.
- **ActiveTO** - City of Toronto program to contribute to the health and wellbeing of residents by providing extra space to be physically active.

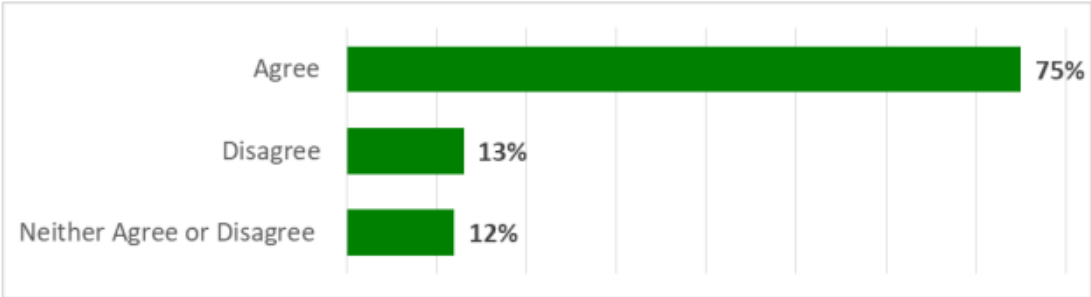
A car-free High Park will fully support all of these important and increasingly urgent goals.

SUPPORT FOR A CAR-FREE HIGH PARK

The overwhelming support for a car-free High Park is well represented in the various City of Toronto High Park Movement Strategy surveys and reports:

1. High Park Movement Strategy 2021 Survey (6,717 respondents)

Overall, the High Park weekend road closures have had a positive impact on my experience in visiting the park.



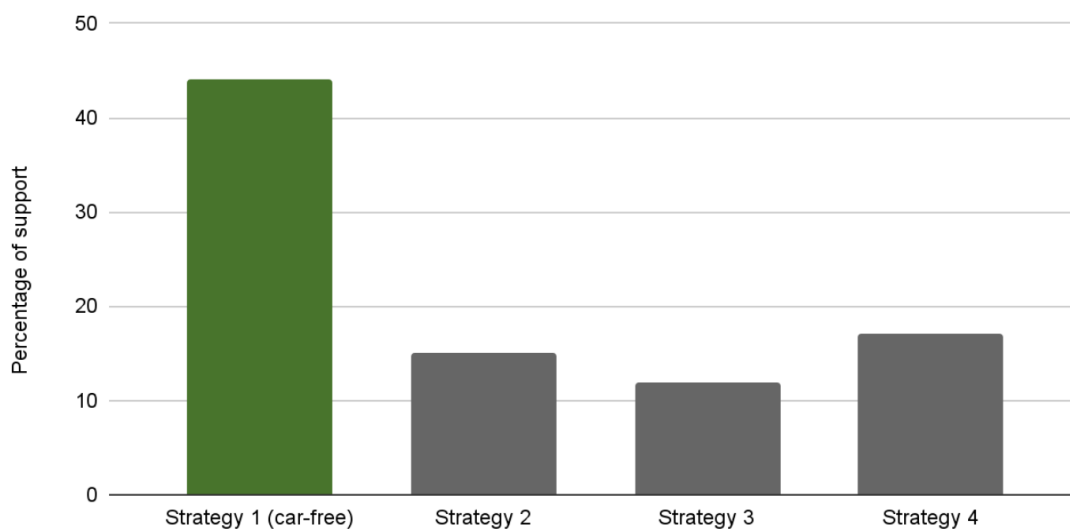
What do you like about the High Park weekend road closures?



2. High Park Movement Strategy 2022 Public Engagement Report (10,384 respondents)

- **Strategy 1 (car-free) was strongly supported** by 44% of respondents compared to 15%, 12% & 17% for all other strategies respectively.
- **Respondents agreed most strongly that Strategy 1 (car-free) would make the park safer, more accessible and improve the natural environment.**
- **Of the 2,030 respondents who identified as having a disability or living with someone with a disability, the majority preferred a car-free High Park.**
- **Of the 2,700 respondents who identified as having children under the age of 12, the majority of families with young children preferred a car-free High Park.**
- Respondents placed highest priority on reducing the amount of motor vehicle traffic within the park and **lowest priority on offering direct vehicular access to interior park destinations.**

Percentage of people who strongly support each strategy



ACCESSIBILITY IN A CAR-FREE HIGH PARK

The majority of the 2,030 respondents who identified as having a disability or living with someone with a disability preferred a car-free High Park. This view is shared by Luke Anderson, the co-founder and executive director of the StopGap Foundation, one of the country's leaders in accessibility advocacy. It is also echoed by Walk Toronto's disability and accessibility committee, which is headed by their members with disabilities: Daniella Levy-Pinto and Adam Roy Cohoon.

The parking lots at Spring Road and by Colborne Lodge would remain open even in a car-free High Park. They currently consist of 40 parking spaces with only 2 being accessible parking spaces. They should be re-imagined as exclusively accessible, family with young children, and senior parking. These parking lots also provide space to support convenient pick-up and drop-off locations.

LOW-CARBON MODES OF TRAVEL TO A CAR-FREE HIGH PARK

High Park is well supported by public transit with 2 subway stops (High Park and Keele), 2 streetcars (501 Queen and 506 College) and a bus (80 Queensway), which drop visitors off at various park entrances. The Bloor Street bike lanes and Martin Goodman Trail provide safe passage to the park for people choosing active modes of transportation. There are also 12 Bike Share stations in and around High Park totalling over 200 available bikes/docks.

CONCLUSION

If a park can't be car-free, then what hope do we have of prioritizing low-carbon modes of transportation, meeting our climate goals, and putting the health and safety of people first? Closing parks to cars is not a radical idea, but rather a sensible one that is being implemented all around the world, including our close neighbours in Montreal and New York City. It is the logical path forward in today's climate, it is the direction the world is heading in, and it is what the strong majority of people in this city want.



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