

April 25, 2023
Toronto City Hall
Infrastructure and Environment Committee
100 Queen Street West
Toronto, ON M5H 2N2

RE: IE3.7 High Park Movement Strategy

To Deputy Mayor McKelvie, and Councillors Colle, Burnside, Peruzza, Saxe, and Morley,

I am writing on behalf of Friends and Families for Safe Streets to express our support for a **car-free High Park, implemented as rapidly as possible.**

Friends and Families for Safe Streets is a group of people whose loved ones were senselessly killed in crashes that could have been prevented, and survivors who were devastated by crashes causing severe, life-altering injuries. We are the ones who have paid the worst possible price for road violence on Toronto's car-filled deadly streets.

It would be far more efficient and less costly to simply do the right thing, once, than to work in an incremental fashion to preserve car access in a park for several more years, continuing to tolerate all of the harms inflicted by the presence of cars. Further, **eroding car-free weekends is a mistake** that we urge you not to pursue.

A factor not explicitly considered in this report is the fact that for people who are disabled, injured, or otherwise not able-bodied, **cars can function as a barrier to accessing public space, not an aid.** Many people with disabilities either can't drive due to the nature of their disability, or are forced into legislated poverty by ODSP and can't afford access to a car. **Cars become a barrier to access because they inevitably bring hostility, pollution, noise, and the potential for what our members have experienced: horrific violence.** Drivers can and do crash into and kill and injure innocent people in a heartbeat, regularly. We should not be countenancing and enabling such a possibility anywhere, let alone in a park. There are many better mobility alternatives that are better suited to a park than private motor vehicles.

Given rates of road violence in Toronto, **there must be tens if not hundreds of thousands of residents who have been horrifically traumatized by road violence, including our members. There are very few green spaces in Toronto where people like us can actually get away from cars,** the instruments of either our loved ones' deaths, or of our near-deaths and severe life-altering injuries. The presence and sounds of cars evokes PTSD symptoms for many victims. Drivers are known to travel at at least double the posted speed limit in High Park, and even police officers driving in the park can't be trusted to refrain from driving their vehicles into people. The presence of cars makes the park inherently less safe. High Park should be a refuge from road violence, a place to go and enjoy nature that is completely safe.

To illustrate how the presence of cars can be a barrier, I would like to tell a quick personal story: I was struck on my bike by a reckless SUV driver in 2015. This driver broke my spine, inflicted a traumatic brain injury, and I nearly died a second time of blood clot complications resulting from all the soft tissue that she mangled when she slammed her 5,000lb SUV into me. About 7 weeks after my crash, I went on a first date with my partner; we went to see Shakespeare in High Park. It was one of the best days of my life, even though I was hobbling around slowly with a broken spine and a massive knee brace. My mobility was too impaired for me to drive a car, so allowing cars in High Park did absolutely nothing to facilitate access. In fact, **the day was only marred by the presence of cars, with drivers revving their engines and creeping forward at me in the crosswalks, because I wasn't walking fast enough for their liking.** I hope you can understand how terrifying and hateful it feels, after being nearly killed by a driver, to have someone drive like that at you, as if you didn't suffer enough the first time. Being on the receiving end of that kind of hostility in a park is beyond jarring and off-putting.

I was so turned off by the presence of cars that even though I was diagnosed with clinically severe depression and anxiety and encouraged to get out into nature as much as possible, I didn't go back to High Park for a very long time. **The cars were the barrier. I was afraid for my safety walking around there when my mobility was severely impaired.** How can it count as a peaceful green space when it is filled with cars, with drivers routinely speeding, and even sometimes intentionally endangering and threatening innocent people? Inviting and tolerating the safety threat that comes with cars into a park is foolish and regressive.

Those who use disabilities as a wedge to demand ongoing car access are ignoring the multitude of appealing and accessible mobility alternatives that exist, which could be implemented in High Park. No car-free advocate ever wants to see someone excluded from travelling into the park and enjoying it. **We simply ask that the city rapidly implement accessible alternative options for mobility in order to take our dovetailing crises of road violence and climate disaster seriously.** If our leaders resist making rapid, bold changes to adhere to our Vision Zero and Transform TO goals in what should be a peaceful green space, that is indeed a sorry and despair-inducing state of affairs.

For those who use recent terrible violent incidents on the TTC as a wedge to demand ongoing car access, note that you are several orders of magnitude more likely to die while driving a car in Toronto than you are on the TTC. Car crashes have been the leading killer of Canadian children for decades. Putting a child in (or near) a car is the most dangerous thing an adult can do in the course of a normal day. It is awful that the TTC has seen such violence due to systemic disinvestment of both social supports and the transit system itself, and that merits urgent action and investment, but it doesn't change the fact that **cars are still much more dangerous in every way than public transit.**

There are also comparators around the world that show that car-free parks are better for everyone. For example, Central Park and Prospect Park in New York City went car-free in 2018. People with disabilities and mobility limitations are able to more freely enjoy the space, people enjoy the sports facilities, families go for picnics, there are dedicated lanes for all types of active transportation on the paved roads, and they are well-functioning and welcoming green spaces that fill in as a backyard for those who don't own a single-family detached dwelling, as many people in Toronto don't. **Five years later, absolutely nobody in New York City is calling for the return of cars to their beautiful green spaces.**

In 1873, the Howard family deeded the original 66 hectares of High Park to the City with the stipulation that it be a "public park for the free use, benefit, and enjoyment of the citizens of the City of Toronto forever." Cars were eventually allowed to invade the park as more and more roads were paved in it. However, we now know that the car-centric obsession of the 1950s was a terrible mistake, especially in cities. It was surely not the intention of the Howards for the park to be for the benefit and enjoyment of the *drivers* of the City of Toronto at the expense of others, and surely not their intention to allow pollution-spewing, hostile, loud, heavy, and dangerous privately-owned machines to rule any of the space.

It is clear that allowing cars in High Park doesn't work for everybody. What would work for everybody is adequate accessible parking spaces at the perimeter of the park, with well-thought-out accessible modes of travel, whether an accessible people circulator, a fleet of quad bikes, wagons to haul gear, mobility scooters, and the like, made available to the public. **We all deserve a High Park where we can actually be safe**, a pleasant green space that is peaceful, quiet, unpolluted and healthy. Please keep cars out of High Park and make it a welcoming green sanctuary and refuge in the middle of our city.

Sincerely,



Jessica Spieker, Spokesperson
Friends and Families for Safe Streets