

## Sunday Car-Free Spaces

### Overview

Car-free initiatives have recently gained worldwide popularity as a way to celebrate and promote active transportation, community cohesion and to help reduce greenhouse gas emissions, air pollution and street noise. The 2008 international car free day inspired over 100 million people in 1,500 cities around the world to take action.

Weekly and monthly events held in cities across Canada are also raising awareness for the benefits of car-free spaces. Whether organized by grassroots community groups or local governments, these programs encourage people to leave their cars behind and instead walk, cycle and roll through city streets and park environments.

This case study examines approaches to creating car free spaces in Ottawa, Toronto and Vancouver.

### Selected Resources

National Capital Commission - Ottawa Sunday Bikedays:  
[http://www.canadacapital.gc.ca/bins/ncc\\_web\\_content\\_page.asp?cid=16297-16299-9970-9972&lang=1&bhcp=1](http://www.canadacapital.gc.ca/bins/ncc_web_content_page.asp?cid=16297-16299-9970-9972&lang=1&bhcp=1)

PS Kensington: <http://www.pskensington.ca/>

City of Vancouver – Summer Spaces:  
<http://vancouver.ca/engsvcs/streets/summerspaces/>

### Context

Car-free spaces are becoming increasingly popular as a way to demonstrate and promote the benefits associated with reductions in automobile use.

Around the world, car-free events such as Sunday parkways, critical mass rides and one-day festivals reclaim the streets and give space for citizens to consider alternatives to the way we build, live in and move around our cities.

The idea behind creating car free spaces is not new. In Bogota, Colombia the weekly *Ciclovía* event has been bringing an average of 2 million people out

every Sunday to bike and walk on over 70 miles of downtown streets since 1976. Ottawa's Sunday Bikeways initiative has been promoting walking and cycling in the National Capital Region since 1971 and Toronto residents can recall a short lived period when Younger Street was temporarily closed to traffic. The annual Car Free Day is now celebrated in over 1,500 cities in 38 countries around the world.

Attributable in part to the increasing awareness of transportation's role in climate change, as well as a renaissance in planning for denser city spaces, there has been a marked rise in car-free initiatives in Canada over the past five years. Major cities and smaller centres alike have developed programs to encourage walking and cycling and to appreciate the physical environment we live in. Specific case studies in Ottawa, Toronto and Vancouver illustrate some of the unique approaches to creating car free spaces.

### Policy context

There are a variety of policy angles that support car-free initiatives, ranging from health promotion to climate change and the environment, transportation and local community development.

The Ottawa Sunday Bikeways event was started in 1971, the same year the Rideau Canal parkway was opened, with the aim of promoting enjoyment of public spaces in the National Capital Region. The event was expanded to include Gatineau Park, but has remained otherwise unchanged and continues to fit within the National Capital Commission's current mandate to build pride and unity in the National Capital Region.

In Vancouver, the political direction for Summer Spaces came from the City of Vancouver's Greenest City Action Team, created in February

2009. This group's first report on "Quick Start Actions," included a recommendation to conduct a car-free trial in several locations around the city. The Summer Spaces initiative also aligns with the goals of Metro Vancouver's Regional Growth Strategy which are to: Create a Compact Urban Area, Support a Sustainable Economy, Protect the Region's Natural Assets, Develop Complete and Resilient Communities, and Support Sustainable Transportation Choices.

In Toronto, policy to support car-free spaces is growing. A newly formed Public Realm Office, a Pedestrian Committee, and a Pedestrian Charter are all helping to facilitate action to improve walkability and the use of public spaces. Despite this momentum, there remains a gap between policy and action in Toronto as on-the-ground support for car-free events is relatively weak.

## Rationale and objectives

Over the past 100 years, cities have undergone dramatic transformations in urban design. This has been largely influenced by the rise of the automobile and our increasing dependency on it. Many now share the view that car-centered cities have engineered themselves away from lifestyles that encourage social interaction, community-scale economic prosperity and active living and active transportation. The results of this can be linked to wide-ranging impacts, including: increasing rates of obesity and diabetes; respiratory illnesses related to air pollution and particulate matter; higher incidence of motor vehicle related traffic accidents; increasing rates of transportation related greenhouse-gas emissions; social isolation and reduced street life; challenges for small businesses; and, and an increase in stress-inducing levels of noise pollution.

Car-free events address these challenges by temporarily reclaiming the streets for more "human-scaled" uses and through this demonstrate to both the public and decision makers the ways in which the design of our cities could be re-imagined for the better.

Encouraging modal shifts away from the car is the fundamental shared objective of car-free events. This is a means to many other objectives which organizers promote and prioritize differently. These other objectives include:

- Stimulating relationship building on a neighbourhood scale;
- Encouraging enjoyment of public spaces;
- Encouraging healthy lifestyles through physical activity;
- Reducing transportation related greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution;
- Reducing street noise;
- Promoting and supporting local business; and,
- Encouraging public performance and art.

Whether they are staged on a weekly, annual or one-time basis, car-free events are designed to have influence all year round. They are used as opportunities to educate on the impacts of automobile dependent transportation, to test out alternatives to the way we use our streets, and to demonstrate public support for change that reduces auto dependency and encourages modal shifts.

## Actions

Along with other cities across Canada, Ottawa, Toronto and Vancouver have each created unique, regularly occurring car free events. Each has a distinct history, purpose and place in these cities.

- **Ottawa:** Started in 1971, Ottawa's Sunday Bikeways event is held every Sunday from May 17 to September 6 from 9am to 1pm. Fifty-five kilometers of parkways are closed to traffic and instead filled with cyclists, pedestrians and in-line skaters. An estimated 100,000 people participate each year.

The Sunday Bikeways program creates a simple and clean atmosphere for participants to enjoy park space and active living. Unlike many similar events held in dense urban areas, there are no vendors, performers or community advocacy groups present. The National Capital Commission, the event's organizer, has recently created a

range of educational materials and activities for the event including information on carbon footprints and on how people can reduce their environmental footprint.

- **Toronto:** Pedestrian Sundays in Kensington Market (PS Kensington) runs one Sunday per month between May and October. The event was founded in 2003 by a local organization called *Streets are for People* and is now supported by local merchants and volunteers, City of Toronto Councilors and City staff.



*PS Kensington event in Toronto*

PS Kensington brings together merchants, performances, films, games, music and more to celebrate community, culture and ecology in the Kensington Market neighbourhood. Each event focuses on a different theme including air, fire, water, earth and Halloween to help inspire creativity and diversity. Multi-culturalism, a cornerstone of Kensington Market, plays a large role in shaping the feel of PS Kensington.

Significant public consultation through surveys and meetings helped define the event from the early stages. Pedestrian Sundays have expanded to Mervish and Baldwin Village neighbourhoods but these have since been discontinued because of the ongoing resource demands. Secure “bike valet” parking stations for bicycles are

provided for cyclists who ride to the event.

- **Vancouver:** City of Vancouver Summer Spaces is a trial initiative set to run through the summer of 2009 and will see car-free zones in four Vancouver neighbourhoods. The key goals of the initiative are to increase community public space in neighbourhoods and to increase community interaction. The results could also help inform decision making around future closures and programming for Olympic Village pedestrian quarters during the 2010 Olympic Games. The trial includes car-free areas in four Vancouver neighbourhoods, each with a different emphasis ranging from food security to multiculturalism.

The concepts for each car-free area were developed by community groups and business associations and put forth as proposals to the City of Vancouver. Out of ten submissions four were selected for funding in the neighbourhoods of Commercial Drive, Mount Pleasant, Collingwood and Gastown. An additional proposal for a cycling route was considered for funding and several others are being considered for future trials. These events include neighbourhood vendors, performances, interactive games and activities and informational booths from local organizations and more. Secure “bike valet” parking stations for bicycles are provided at every location for cyclists who ride to the event.

## Results

Results from each of these events are highlighted below.

- **Ottawa:** The success of the Sunday Bikedays program is evident in the number of years it has been running. Participant surveys conducted in the past indicated a 93% satisfaction rate among participants. In terms of demographics, they have found that:

- 65% of participants have cycled, 46% have walked and 14% have in-line skated
  - 93% of participants are residents of the National Capital Region (NCR) region and of these 85% are Ontario residents and 15% are from Quebec
  - 63% of participants are male, 37% are female and 54% are between the ages of 35-54
- **Toronto:** Traffic counts indicate that PS Kensington nearly doubles the volume of pedestrian traffic in the neighbourhood, bringing in between 15,000 and 16,000 people (versus 8,000 on non-event days). It is believed that people participating in the event also tend to spend more time in the neighbourhood.

PS Kensington reports that many merchants, such as restaurants and cafes, report higher revenues on PS Kensington days. Others appreciate that the events bring new patrons to the neighbourhood and increase exposure to their businesses that could lead to future sales.

- **Vancouver:** The Vancouver Summer Spaces program was designed with a thorough monitoring and evaluation plan to assess the successes and challenges of the summer-long trial program. Monitoring will include a commercial retail study, user surveys, pedestrian counts, vehicle counts on residential side-streets and local resident surveys. Reporting is expected to be complete by December 2009. Organizers will use the data to determine next steps and to inform decisions around future trials and the possibility of regular closures.

After five weeks of trials, results for the Summer Spaces program are mixed. The Commercial Drive trial, consisting of weekly closures along eight blocks, was a departure from the annual car free festival there which is a major event drawing up to

50,000 people from across the city. Organizers attempted to create weekly events that required less programming and resources and that would draw local residents. Commercial Drive businesses, however, expressed (through the Business Improvement Association) that the re-routing of buses and the street parking restrictions on Commercial Drive was negatively impacting them, and organizers agreed to cancel the remaining trials. Trials in the other three neighbourhoods have reported successes and will continue throughout the summer.



*Summer Spaces on Main Street in Vancouver*

## Challenges

Reimagining the way we use city streets comes with a particular set of challenges. The logistics involved in blocking streets and re-routing traffic are significant. Negotiating approvals for activities and managing the impacts on local businesses can also present challenges to organizers.

- **Logistics:** Coordination for road closures is a major resource requirement. Traffic barriers need to be set up well ahead of the start time of the event and staffed for the duration to help coordinate and enforce traffic re-routing. The more complicated the road network within the closure, the more resources are required to manage barriers. Local transit may also have to be re-routed which requires coordination for

transit authorities and almost certainly inadvertently inconveniences transit users. Coordinating performances, booths, artists and the like are also major logistics issues for events that choose to incorporate these elements. This can be especially true in the development phase of events when relationships are being established and needs in terms of permitting, infrastructure and equipment are being determined.

- **Approvals and Permitting:** Obtaining approvals, permits and insurance for car-free events can present considerable challenges. This is especially true when it is not a government agency organizing the event. For the City of Toronto, PS Kensington is considered a “Special Event” and organizers are required to submit detailed plans months in advance, for each monthly event. Despite the fact that the event runs regularly throughout the summer and has occurred for six consecutive years, the bureaucratic requirements remain cumbersome. This adds to the overall workload of volunteer organizers, artists and performers and reduces flexibility. The time and energy required for these processes to could be a prohibitive barrier for some communities.
- **Impacts on Local Businesses:** Both the Vancouver and Toronto events involve closures on busy urban streets. The impacts on businesses within these areas vary. Those with products and services suited to appeal to meandering pedestrians thrive. Others, who suffer from being cut off from their regular customers or whose operations are impeded by the closures, may suffer. Adaptation is key to finding a balance. This can either be on the part of merchants who find creative ways to make a presence for themselves or among organizers who find ways to accommodate essential services.

## Best Practices

Determining what works best for organizing and implementing car-free events depends on who the event is designed to attract and what type of interaction is being encouraged (both between participants and with the surrounding community). The following lists several best practice examples garnered from past experience with car free events.

- **Select the right location:** Selecting a good location for a car-free event is critical to attracting participants and for maintaining support and cooperation among residents and businesses. Most importantly, the location and size needs to align with the goals of the event. An event focused mainly on promoting active transportation and enjoyment of public space requires a much different setting than an event focused on encouraging community cohesion and vibrancy.

Locations need to be central to the people the events are designed to attract and accessible by foot, bike, transit and even automobile. It is necessary to determine whether or not it is appropriate to set closures on main thoroughfares or on side streets, acknowledging the impacts each scenario will have on drivers and businesses. The size of the area is also important, keeping in mind the resources required to manage and fill the space that is closed-off. Finally, selecting an area with fewer entry/exist points (including alleys and on-ramps) will lessen resources required to erect and manage barriers and create fewer driver conflicts.

- **Collaborate with residents and community groups:** Taking the time to consult local residents, businesses and community organizers before launching a car-free event will provide significant benefits in the long run. Having local residents on-side will help with word of mouth advertising, can help supply a volunteer base, and help ensure local neighbourhood

participation is maximized. The support of local business is also crucial. Understanding and working to manage their needs will create solid relationships and promote communication so that issues that inevitably arise can be addressed efficiently and effectively.

- **Be consistent:** Holding events that run on a regular schedule, in a defined area, with similar programming, year after year can help keep resource needs down, maintain participation levels and keep negative experiences (i.e., frustrated drivers) to a minimum. This is especially clear in the case of Ottawa’s Sunday Bikeways where residents have become very familiar with the closures and there are few public complaints made against the event.
- **Evaluate capacity:** Car-free events require considerable time and resources to coordinate. From the consultations required to formulate the event to the operations on the ground on the day of, organizers rely on fundraising, donations, volunteers and the cooperation of local merchants and residents. A balance needs to be found so that the event can be consistently well run without overextending resources, interest in participation and the good will of businesses and residents.

## Resources

The resources required for car free events are as varied as the events themselves.

- **Vancouver:** The Summer Spaces trial is being implemented with a budget of \$200,000 from the City of Vancouver. If the proposed cycling route were included, this cost would rise to \$325,000. Funding comes from the City of Vancouver Parking Reserve. Spending is distributed as follows:
  - \$85,000 for the four trials to support logistics (e.g., transit re-routing, etc.)

- \$65,000 for monitoring and evaluation
- \$40,000 for temporary staff resources
- \$10,000 for communications

The lost parking revenue for the time of the street closures is estimated at around \$9,500.

In addition to funding from the City of Vancouver, each of the community organizations have committed resources (in-kind and cash) to the events.

- **Toronto:** PS Kensington relies heavily on volunteer support and strong networks with local artists, performers and community organizers. Between three and 20 volunteers are needed per event. A training session is held to help orient volunteers with their responsibilities for the day.

The City of Toronto provides funding to reimburse PS Kensington organizers for the following required items:

- Insurance: ~\$300/ event
- Permits: \$75/event
- Barricade rental: \$500/event
- Paid duty officers: \$60/hour



*Cyclists along the Rideau Canal for Ottawa’s Sunday Bikedays*

- **Ottawa:** Sunday Bikeways requires relatively few resources to run. Staffing for the road barricades is the largest resource need. This is currently managed by three Ottawa companies that each provide

between eight and 13 volunteers on a weekly rotating basis to staff the barricades. In exchange, the companies benefit from having visibility at the event. Coordination for the event is a part-time responsibility for one NCC staff person. In addition to this, one summer student helps fulfill weekday tasks and two students and one conservation officer manage activities on the ground at the Sunday events. Alcatel-Lucent is the primary sponsor for the event.

## Lessons Learned

- **Know your neighbours:** Car-free events can create major disruptions for residents and businesses. Efforts must be made to understand the needs and expectations of neighbours from the delivery schedules of produce merchants, to the cultural norms of shopkeepers and noise tolerance of residents. Creative solutions can be found if all parties remain open and good working relationships are established from the outset.
- **Collaboration with local government:** Car-free events require a considerable amount of resources. It is clear that both Ottawa's Sunday Bikedays and Vancouver's Summer Spaces benefit from being run as government programs. In addition to having greater and more consistent access to resources and funding, local government management often means administration (i.e., permits and approvals) required to put on the event can be streamlined and minimized, an important consideration for volunteer-dependent events with limited budgets.

## References

National Capital Commission - Ottawa Sunday Bikedays:

[http://www.canadascapital.gc.ca/bins/ncc\\_web\\_content\\_page.asp?cid=16297-16299-9970-9972&lang=1&bhcp=1](http://www.canadascapital.gc.ca/bins/ncc_web_content_page.asp?cid=16297-16299-9970-9972&lang=1&bhcp=1)

PS Kensington: <http://www.pskensington.ca/>

City of Vancouver – Summer Spaces:

<http://vancouver.ca/engsvcs/streets/summerspaces/>

---