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GTA

Just how much of a park should High Park be?

City's review of park's access could pit residents who value its natural features against those who see it as a venue for recreation.

By **Ben Spurr** City Hall Bureau

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What is High Park's highest purpose? Is it as a nature preserve, or a recreational facility? A place to go for a quiet hike, or to take the family to visit the zoo?

Those questions hang heavy over a review of potential changes to High Park's road network that will be debated at city hall next week.

The review, part of the High Park Movement Strategy, is aimed at reducing conflicts between road users travelling through the 160-hectare property in Toronto's downtown west end. Proposals on the table range from minor measures like signage and speed humps, to more significant interventions like better bike lanes and even removing parts of the road network.

The outcome won't just affect how people move around the sprawling green space, it could determine how residents use one of the city's most beloved parks for years to come. In doing so, it could pit residents who value High Park for its natural features against those who see it as a venue for entertainment and recreation.

According to an [interim report](#) on the review going to the city's infrastructure and environment committee next Wednesday, more than one million people visit High Park every year. The number has stayed high throughout the pandemic as residents flocked to outdoor spaces.

Visitors arrive by transit and car, on foot and on bikes, and compete for space on the park's 5 kilometres of roads. It can get messy. A video circulated online this week appeared to show a driver intentionally swerving into a cyclist in the park.

"The infrastructure of the park is kind of incoherent. And that incoherence is causing conflicts that are often dangerous," said Coun. Gord Perks (Ward 4, Parkdale—High Park).

According to the report, the park's network is marred by irregular intersection configurations and poor sightlines, and there are few controlled intersections to allow for safe crossings. Park-goers have complained about speeding by both drivers and cyclists.

The review will propose long-term improvements focused on safety, accessibility and the park's ecological health. Potential changes fall into three categories: park access, traffic flow and new infrastructure.

Controlling access would require few physical changes, and could involve measures like closing entrances, restricting all vehicle traffic in the park and improved transit. Flow management could entail minor modifications like traffic calming, turning restrictions and pedestrian-only areas. New infrastructure would be the most intensive option, and could include wider sidewalks, separated bike lanes and narrowing or removing roads.

City staff plan to make final recommendations for the review, which will also consider new safety measures on Parkside Drive, in early 2023. In the meantime, staff may institute "quick wins" like cautionary pylons and "slow down" signs. Next month the TTC also plans to resume weekend service on the 30B High Park bus route, which serves five stops in the park but was suspended in March 2020.

Perks wouldn't back any specific options laid out in the report, noting that any solutions will likely be complex. But he said the car-free weekends that have been in place in High Park for the past two years offer "really good insight into what kind of changes are possible."

The closures began as a way to give residents a way to remain socially distanced early in the pandemic, but they've stayed in place since and are supported by three-quarters of park users, according to a city survey. Perks said their success is evidence that any permanent changes should advance efforts to re-naturalize High Park, which currently is home to 550 parking spaces, and favour pedestrians and cyclists over drivers.

But some dedicated park users say permanently reducing car access would harm important High Park institutions. Sarah Doucette, who chairs the Friends of High Park Zoo, said the weekend closures have made it harder for the animal attraction to draw visitors for fundraisers and special events.

Doucette, a former city councillor for the area, said the park is also home to baseball, soccer and ball hockey leagues, whose players use cars to lug gear around. She noted the Colborne Lodge historic site at High Park's south end is more than two kilometres from the subway, a distance that is unwalkable for many residents.

"Toronto prides itself in being accessible," and significantly restricting car traffic would mean "making the park, a public park, not accessible to a lot of people," said Doucette.

"The user groups who call High Park home have to be taken into consideration."



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