

COMPLETE STREETS AND THE 15-MINUTE CITY



Rob Jowett

The development of complete streets in Toronto neighbourhoods could play a major role in reducing automotive dependency in cities, especially when paired with the concept of a 15-minute city. However, some urbanists question whether such a model of urban planning would be possible in large parts of Toronto, and wonder whether such a goal is even worthwhile.

On February 22, **The Centre for Active Transportation** (TCAT) released the report [Complete Streets and the 15-Minute City](#), which examines the 15-minute city concept and role of complete streets in achieving this model. The ‘15-minute city’ is an urban planning concept that originated in Paris and focusses on providing city residents access to all the basic necessities, such as food, work, health care, green space, and recreation that they would need within a 15-minute walk or bike ride from their homes. Complete streets are streets designed to be accessible for all users regardless of mobility choice, be they

young or old, car drivers or active transportation users, or whether or not they face mobility challenges.

“The complete streets concept has really taken hold over about a decade,” TCAT director **Nancy Smith Lea** told *NRU*. “There’s become an increasing awareness of the damage that our current transportation policies are inflicting on our communities. Just everything from the way that our streets are built, and then how they’re used, that there’s so much space devoted to motor vehicles in our cities and they’re dangerous, they’re inhospitable for people walking and cycling. They have so many detrimental impacts.”

The report describes four main attributes that 15-minute

cities have: transportation, density, proximity, and diversity. Much of the infrastructure for achieving the connectivity between locations across neighbourhoods is the same in both models and thus the 15-minute city and complete streets concepts can complement each other and can help urbanists achieve the goals being sought through both planning models.

“Complete streets [are] really about [a] hyperlocal approach... what can we do about this street right here? How can we make it safer for people walking and cycling?” says Smith Lea. “The 15-minute city is really about destination. It’s making sure that there’s interesting, available destinations within a

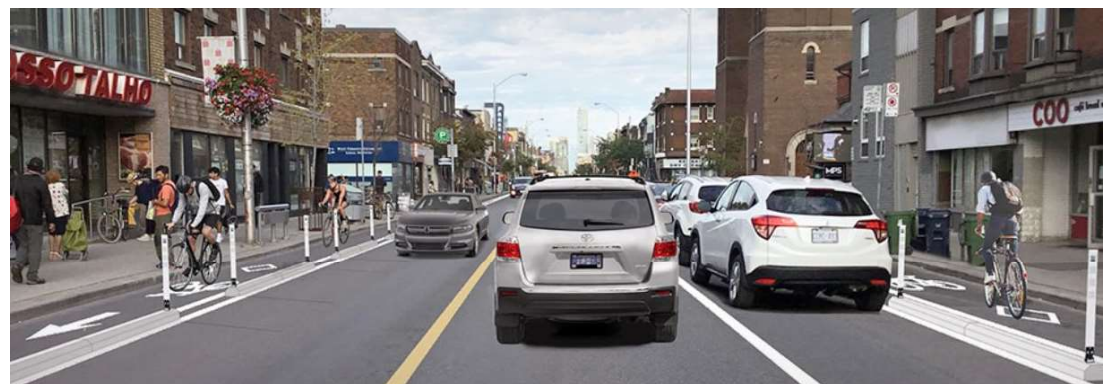
15-minute walk or bike.”

The TCAT report describes several advantages to improving communities through the development of 15-minute cities and complete streets, such as increasing socialization, improving quality of life, and stimulating local economic activity. The report examines the economic activity along Bloor Street West, where bike lanes were built in 2016 between Shaw Street and Avenue Road and

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Rendering of the proposed Bloor West bikeway extension in Toronto. The city began a project in 2016 to reduce car lanes on Bloor Street West from four to two in order to provide bike lanes along the street. So far, lanes have been built between Avenue Road and Shaw Street.

SOURCE: CITY OF TORONTO



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car lanes were reduced from four to two. According to an economic impact report on the neighbourhood conducted by TCAT and released in 2019, visitor spending by pedestrians, cyclists, and drivers on Bloor Street West rose by at least ten percentage points between 2015 and 2016-2017. Spending in the area by transit users fell by just three per cent. The city is now considering extending the lanes from Shaw Street to Runnymede Road.

The TCAT report takes an in-depth look at the **City of Ottawa**, one of the first municipalities to explicitly reference the 15-minute city model in its planning documents, including in its draft 2021 official plan. One of the strategic directions in the draft official plan is that by 2046, more than half of all trips in the city of Ottawa will be taken by sustainable or active transportation means. The final version of the new official plan is expected to be presented to council in September.

“The concept of 15-minute neighbourhoods in the new Official Plan is a strategic direction that frames future growth to be more resilient,” City of Ottawa economic development services planner **Royce Fu** told *NRU*. “It will

promote healthier communities that are sustainable and responsive to the impacts of climate change and [that will] sustain the range of choices that people seek in a 15-minute neighbourhood by virtue of critical mass.”

Fu says complete streets create environments that are more attractive for people and transform streets into destinations, rather than simply travel routes. The city has undertaken several road redesign projects in recent years in order to create complete streets. Most recently, a portion of Elgin Street, a major downtown Ottawa street with numerous local stores and restaurants, was reduced from four traffic lanes to two in order to create more patio and parking space so that it can

act as more of a main street for downtown neighbourhoods. The road was also designated as a shared right-of-way for both cars and bikes. Power lines on the street were buried to allow more space for people on the street.

Due to the recent completion of the Elgin Street renewal project in Ottawa amid the economic shutdown resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, which has kept residents out of public spaces worldwide, it is too early to determine what the effects of the project will be on business and livability in the area.

There are several challenges to achieving 15-minute cities within the GTHA, especially in the suburbs, where land use policies that prioritized car travel were made for decades, Toronto-based transit advocate **Steve Munro** told *NRU*. Munro says that many parts of downtown Toronto, which were built up over 100 years ago and before the ubiquity of car travel, are already effectively

15-minute cities, and there is little that needs to be done to achieve that vision in those communities. Conversely, he says the city’s suburbs may not achieve that goal for decades, if at all.

“From the point of view of someone who lives in Scarborough or northern Etobicoke... the idea of a 15-minute city is laughable because they’re simply not built for that sort of thing,” says Munro. “And what I worry about is that you get political pushback, because people say, ‘Well, this is all very nice but it’s a classic granola-crunching downtown latte-sipping view of the world that doesn’t apply to me, and when are you going to build my subway?’”

Munro says there are several challenges that the suburbs face with achieving 15-minute cities, including whether the locations residents need to get to even exist and whether there is enough neighbourhood connectivity and safe active transportation infrastructure to allow them to access those locations. He says that bike lanes may conflict with transit users in the suburbs and would make building them there very challenging, and that suburbanites who will still depend on car travel for long commutes are likely to resist

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The City of Ottawa recently redesigned and reconstructed Elgin Street, a major downtown artery, into a more complete street with fewer car lanes and increased patio space.

SOURCE: CITY OF OTTAWA

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removing traffic lanes to make space for bike lanes if they do not see a concrete and specific need for the lanes in their neighbourhoods.

City of Toronto

Scarborough community planning manager **Christian Ventresca** told *NRU* that the city is looking at how to build up local communities in Toronto's suburbs and provide the amenities that people are looking for. He says that as areas of the suburbs are redeveloped, especially low-rise shopping centres that are being regularly redeveloped into dense, mixed-use areas, there are opportunities to create more vibrant urban areas with a greater range of commercial and community offerings.

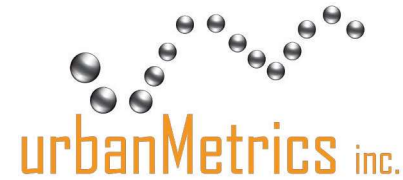
"There are places where we can use the size of the site to create that fine-grained, diverse, mixed-use community that has that 15-minute concept, but it is limited to those who can get to that place in 15 minutes," says Ventresca. "We hear from residents a lot that they want to see more of [this kind of planning] in their communities."

The city also has a cycling network plan with over 120 kilometres of planned bike lanes, including on major suburban streets, that would allow for streets to be

redesigned to better serve local residents.

Smith Lea says she agrees with many of the criticisms levelled at the 15-minute city model and that applying the model to the suburbs will be challenging. She says reducing traffic lanes on suburban roads may simply push traffic onto other streets, making those areas more congested and less safe. She says making these changes in these kinds of areas will be challenging and will take a long time. But she believes that achieving the main goals of complete streets and 15-minute cities—safe active transportation options and local offerings—may be more important than just redesigning every street and focussing on the 15-minute travel time specifically.

"It's not going to be our saviour," says Smith Lea. "Transportation really needs to be context-specific... [and] a real priority for transportation planning is to focus on how to solve some of those suburban issues." 🌱



NEW APPOINTMENTS

urbanMetrics is proud to announce that **Peter Thoma** has been appointed as the firm's new President. As a 20-year veteran of the industry, Peter looks forward to strengthening client relationships with industry and government leaders across the planning and development sector.

The firm is also very pleased to announce that **Chris White** and **Craig Ferguson** have been elevated to full Partners in the firm, in addition to the promotion of **Matt Paziuk** to the firm's leadership team as an Associate Partner.

The firm also welcomes **Elnaz Ghafoori** to the practice, who joins us in the role of Project Manager.



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