April 30, 2020

To:

Ottawa City Council

Ottawa Board of Health

National Capital Commission

The Healthy Transportation Coalition is a group of 35 organizations and more than 200 individuals working together to create a better, more equitable transportation system in Ottawa. We are concerned about the negative consequences of restrictions on the use of public space intended to reduce the spread of COVID-19. We are suggesting a different approach.

We appreciate that these are unprecedented times, when decisions need to be made quickly based on the available evidence. At the same time, it is clear that the current situation is unsustainable and is harming the physical and mental health of many in our community.

The City’s decision to close parks to all uses except passing through them, which goes beyond the province’s order to close all park amenities, has adversely affected those who do not have their own private outdoor space. This includes some of the most vulnerable in our community. The strict enforcement of the park and park amenity closures and the issuing of significant fines at a time when many are dealing with financial insecurity is unnecessary and unhelpful. It has made some people fearful to venture outside and nervous when they do leave their homes.

In addition to this closing of park space, the City has been reluctant, outside of a few, limited areas, to follow the example of cities worldwide and open now-deserted street space to allow for safe, active transportation. Citizens instructed to stay two metres apart are struggling to do so on narrow sidewalks. Again, the most vulnerable, those who do not have an option to travel by private vehicle, are among the most affected. The need for safe streets with space for physical distancing will only increase as the economy re-opens and restrictions loosen.

While we support the NCC’s opening of part of the Queen Elizabeth Driveway to active transportation, this small section is not enough. Much more is needed. As well, the NCC’s many greenspaces could provide an important refuge for people looking for safe spaces for fresh air and exercise as the pandemic continues.

We were pleased to see the Board of Health recently express its support for the Medical Officer of Health’s professional advice that “physical activity and getting fresh air are important for our overall physical and mental wellbeing,” as well as its support for increasing the amount of safe active transportation space.

We understand the need for restrictions as we all attempt to control the spread of the virus and avoid overwhelming the health care system. However, we also believe that it is possible to use evidence-based public health measures to control the spread that are compatible with allowing greater access to public space in the city.

To that end, we recommend the following:

1. **Stop over-ticketing people in public spaces.** The vast majority of people understand the need for public health measures and are doing their best to comply. A heavy-handed approach and the issuing of significant fines only inspires fear and mistrust at a time when people need understanding and encouragement.
2. **Focus the message on physical distancing.** There is widespread acceptance of the need for physical distancing in places such as grocery stores, on sidewalks and pathways, and on public transit. Messages should be amplified about the importance of physical distancing as a way to stay safe and keep others safe while in parks and other public space.
3. **To enable physical distancing, open up as much public space as possible.** The more public space is available, the easier it will be for people to physically distance within it. More parking lanes can be converted to safe space for walking, cycling and rolling. More parkways can be opened up for active transportation. More streets can be converted to local traffic only. More spaces in parks can be opened. Opening up more public space in every neighbourhood will avoid attracting people to a “destination.” Particular attention should be paid to disadvantaged areas, which often lack sufficient park space and greenspace.
4. **Seek the support of other levels of government.** Cities are dealing with incredible budget challenges and should receive funding from other levels of government to convert public space for physical distancing as part of a coordinated pandemic response.

Sincerely,

Board of Directors

Health Transportation Coalition