



BIKEOTTAWA

2020 ANNUAL REPORT ON CYCLING





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Cover Photo: A quiet evening on the Alexandria Bridge, slated to be replaced as its condition can no longer support automobiles. Some are calling for this historic bridge to remain for active transportation.

Note: This report includes aggregated and de-identified data from [Strava Metro](#). Any persons or organizations wishing to use any portion of this report should contact [Bike Ottawa](#) for permission.

Message from the President

It can be fairly said that no one will look at their life after 2020 as the same as before.

In the space of a few short weeks, our world was turned upside down as the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the globe, many of us pivoted from riding a bike to the office, to homeschooling, remote work, and a drastically different way of living. For many of us, these events were stressful, but also led us to change our routines. An unprecedented number of people in cities worldwide discovered that their bikes are a wonderful way to explore neighbourhoods, enjoy a leisurely trip to the grocery store, or get some much-needed time outdoors, away from

screens. As a city, we unfortunately missed the opportunity to provide more space for people to ride bikes safely, but were fortunate that the National Capital Commission opened many of its parkways for active transportation. While we regret that the City of Ottawa did not provide any additional safe space for active transportation, we were still given the opportunity to imagine how our city can be different if we make space for people to ride safely.

As we look at the City's progress towards becoming a biking city in 2020, we see that we have progressed in some areas, but need to continue our efforts in others. After four people on bikes lost their lives on our streets in 2019, there were no fatalities in 2020. However, we know that our politicians have not yet embraced the principles and goals of Vision Zero. This was highlighted by the release in September of the findings of the Cycling Safety Review of High Volume Intersections commissioned in the wake of the fatal collision between a driver and a person on a bicycle on Laurier Avenue West. While on the one hand, the City has acknowledged that many intersections pose a significant risk for people who bike, the lack of dedicated funding to fix these intersections shows where the city's priorities lie.

2020 also saw the rise of movements like Black Lives Matter, bringing longstanding demands for justice, equity, diversity and inclusion to the forefront. With these events, we were forced to confront the reality that BIPOC communities experience streets and public spaces in ways that many of us would find uncomfortable and even unsafe. As advocates for a biking city, this has been an opportunity to start a conversation about how we can do our best to ensure that active transportation in the city meets the needs of all communities.

All these events have taken place in conjunction with the pressing need to address climate change. Because a significant portion of the City's greenhouse gas emissions emanate from the transportation sector, biking should play a critical role in lowering these emissions and encouraging more compact 15-minute neighbourhoods. The City's Climate Change Master Plan recognizes switching to active transportation as a priority, albeit a shift for residents to take on their own. We need the City to be more ambitious to help us make that shift. An extensive year-round bike network needs to be a critical part of the plan to address climate change, and we will continue to press the City to do so.

The past year has taught Bike Ottawa and the bike community important lessons: despite a global pandemic that has dramatically disrupted when and where we travel in the city, more and more people want to ride bicycles. With that momentum, we can amplify the message that we need investments in infrastructure for a bikeable city. To do so, we need to not only support those who already use their bicycle to move around Ottawa, but also build a diverse coalition that represents the needs of all communities.



President of Bike Ottawa - Erinn Cunningham



COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic had reverberating effects on all aspects of life as we knew it. As stores were shut down and workplaces quickly transitioned to work-from-home, streets everywhere became much quieter. But as the weather warmed and ridership on public transportation plummeted due to fear of transmission, more and more people began riding bicycles.

["Bikes in big demand, short on supply during pandemic"](#)

Demand quickly skyrocketed as public health authorities confirmed that outdoor activity was a safe way to spend time during the pandemic. Because of concerns over air quality negatively impacting the symptoms of COVID-19 if people turned to the automobile for their transportation needs, the World Health Organization asked people to walk and cycle instead. Pathways and sidewalks began to overflow, leading to concerns about transmission while outdoors. Increased demand for space was met equally with increased demand for new bikes, used bikes, and tune-ups, as local shops struggled to keep up with the record-high interest.

National Capital Commission Reclaims Roads for Active Transportation

Around the world, cities adapted in different ways to accommodate more people using bicycles trying to get around in a safe and efficient manner when it became clear that providing additional space was vital for physical distancing and exercise.

['A wonderful surprise': Ottawans flock to closed-off Queen Elizabeth Driveway](#)

Ottawa saw an expansion of the popular Sunday Bike Days program on National Capital Commission (NCC) parkways as part of the NCC's Parkway Pilot Project. This began with transitioning 2.5 kilometres of the Queen Elizabeth Driveway (QED) to the public for active use, seven days a week from April to August, and on weekends from September to October. The Sir John A. MacDonald (SJAM) and Sir George-Etienne Cartier (SGEC) parkways both expanded to being open to active users on both Saturdays and Sundays. The Gatineau Park Pathways were also opened to active users for a greater number of days of the week. The results were very positive with 663,000 trips along these parkways from May to October.

Perhaps the unintended spin-off effect was that these opened parkways not only benefited those using their bicycles for a mental break and to get some fresh air, these roads now opened up key commuter routes where people, friends, and families could move about their city for transportation needs along safe, comfortable, and attractive routes along waterfronts. Residents, for the first time, could reimagine how different these spaces could look when used by people getting around by bicycle.

SGEC



8.3 km from Aviation Park to St. Joseph Boulevard

May - October weekends only



75% of visitors using bicycles



Over 25,000 visits



QED



28% of visitors using bicycles

52% of visitors on foot



June was the busiest month



Over 325,000 visits



SJAM



5.1 km from Island Park Dr to Booth St

May - October weekends only



71% of visitors using bicycles



Over 105,000 visits



Gatineau Park Parkways



27 km from Aviation Park to St. Joseph Boulevard

May - October weekends only



57% of visitors using bicycles



Over 200,000 visits





Open Streets in Ottawa

As the City of Ottawa was very reluctant to give up any road space from cars to allow for the safe movement of residents, several City councillors and one Business Improvement Association (BIA) took it upon themselves to find a way to provide more space for active transportation and to support local businesses. The Bank Street BIA succeeded in closing Bank Street to cars and opening it up to people from Flora Street to Queen Street during Saturdays throughout the summer. Councillor Shawn Menard opened the two outer car lanes to people crossing over Bank Street Bridge during the spring and summer, and Councillor Jeff Leiper created a slow street on Byron Avenue.

["Mayor unmoved by calls to open roads to pedestrians"](#)

Early on in the pandemic, there seemed to be a disconnect between the needs of residents for more space in the urban core where long lines and crowded sidewalks around essential services were common, and the perception that providing more space for active transportation was a threat to public safety. Some on the city council were concerned that residents would instead use the space for recreation and gather in large numbers. Urban councillors continued to push for more space for physical distancing for their constituents.

["Mayor's intervention blocks plan to open Bank Street to pedestrians"](#)

In May, any future open streets were made difficult by a motion from Mayor Jim Watson that put the decision-making process in the hands of roadside businesses to approve any changes to street parking for cars. Even if that hurdle could be overcome by councillors, they were forced to pay for any materials out of their own meagre traffic calming budgets. This motion made opening up space for residents quite challenging for councillors, most notably, the removal of a small number of roadside parking spaces on Bank Street in the Glebe, despite a newly-opened parking garage close by sitting nearly empty.

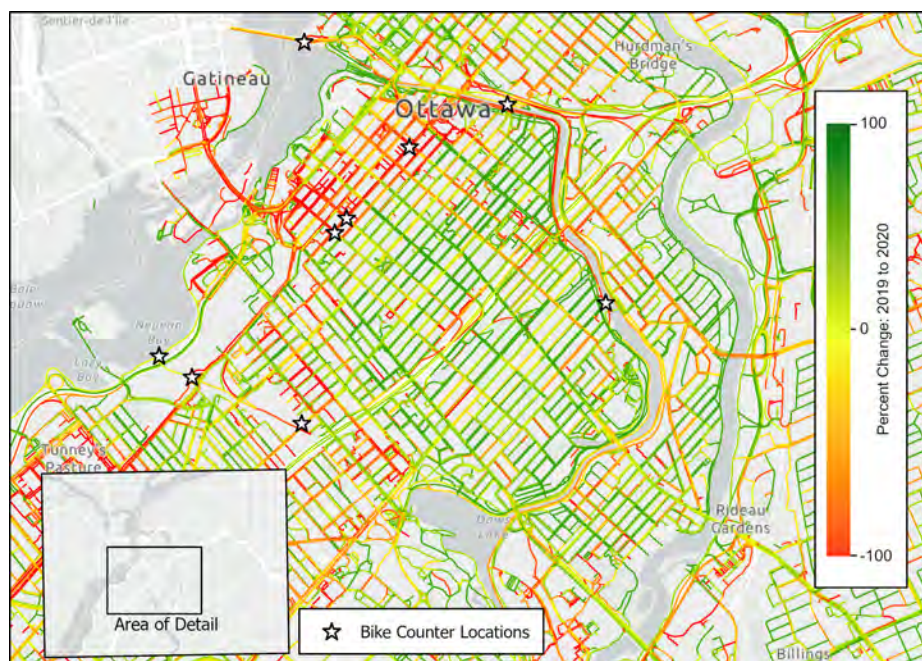
Cycling Trend Changes in 2020

2020 saw major changes in patterns as to how Ottawans were using their bicycles, and where they were riding their bicycles.

Using data from Strava, Bike Ottawa compared trips by bicycle in 2019 with 2020. The map below shows a large drop in Centretown, Tunney's Pasture and Gatineau (in RED) - home to many offices and federal government buildings, sitting vacant with many employees now working from home. In comparison, there was a huge jump in bicycle trips made in most other areas of this map. Instead of only using bicycles for traditional commuting, we can guess that people were now using their bicycles for many different reasons and to reach many different

destinations: trips to get groceries or other essentials, getting to area parks with the kids, or just heading out to get some fresh air.

On the map below, we can deduce that City of Ottawa bike counters were set up in locations to capture the bulk of traditional cycling traffic, either along major commuting routes or along NCC pathways. With residents making the shift to using their bicycles on many of Ottawa's streets for everyday transportation, should this change how we collect cycling data and how we build bicycle infrastructure to provide safer streets for all ages and abilities?



Change in bicycle trips between 2019 and 2020 (data provided by Strava)

Bicycle counters set up to capture commuting and recreational cycling show a major shift in patterns, with Laurier (at Metcalfe) - largely used for commuting, dropping off, whereas largely recreational pathways like the O-Train Pathway (also known as the Trillium MUP) and Ottawa River Pathway (ORP) at Prince of Wales bridge, see a huge jump in users.



Other Canadian Cities Making Space for People

The City of Toronto launched the "ActiveTO" initiative in May 2020 in response to the pandemic.

ActiveTO initiatives included opening up car lanes to people to get active on the normally busy Lake Shore Boulevard East and West on weekends. The program also included the Quiet Streets program, which designated 65 kilometers of streets as shared space by encouraging local vehicle access only and opening the streets to those on foot, bicycles, or using mobility devices.

"There's great potential with this 19.5 km route focused on economic development, physical health & social equity." - Toronto City Councillor Krysten Wong-Tam

In June 2020, the City of Montreal, as part of its Safe Active Transportation Circuit, opened over 300 kilometres of new, temporary pedestrian and bike lanes. Some of this space included closing roads to car traffic, while in other areas, car lanes were reduced to favour wider sidewalks and bike lanes.

Many other Canadian cities also took steps to open space for active transportation and recreation during the COVID-19 pandemic including the Cities of Vancouver, Calgary, Winnipeg, Moncton, Kitchener, Victoria, Waterloo, and Edmonton.



Climate Change

Bicycles as Transportation during this Climate Emergency

While the COVID-19 pandemic has rightly been at the top of everyone's mind over the past year, climate change remains the greatest long-term threat to life around the entire world. Ottawa city council declared a climate emergency on April 24, 2019, and in January 2020, a Climate Change Master Plan was approved. Because the City's 2019 emission inventory found 44% of GHG emissions are from the transportation sector, we ask, what role will bicycles play (or not play) in this plan? Priority #7 of the plan hints that the switch to active transportation lies with "private action". Perhaps, there is our answer.

The City's transportation strategy to respond to the climate emergency seems to be largely reliant on the switch to electric vehicles (EVs) and large investments in public transportation. While these are both part of the solution, the bicycle seems to be missing from this strategy. EV's are still cars that require very expensive road infrastructure, they produce air pollution from air particulates released during braking, rolling noise pollution from tires, impede healthy levels of activity, require resources on a massive scale to build and charge their batteries, and just plain take up so much space in our city. And what about public transportation? It is important, but it's also expensive for users, very expensive to build, and cannot reach everyone's front door.



Ottawa's Draft Official Plan: Eliminate Half of all Car Trips

A viable transportation strategy with a climate change focus should eliminate many car trips. The draft Official Plan discusses just this goal - to eliminate over half of all car trips. If residents found it safe, convenient, and enjoyable to bike to the nearby grocery store, to know their children would be safe cycling to school, or were able to turn that 5 kilometre trip to public transportation into a 15-minute bike ride versus a one hour walk, this goal suddenly becomes much more realistic. But there needs to be a shift in thinking to enable journeys to move towards lower carbon modes of transport, like bicycles. Continuing to undertake very expensive road widening does not indicate that Ottawa is committed to making that shift. These actions will only encourage more residents to hop in the driver's seat and at the same time drain the coffers for the widespread active transportation infrastructure that is so desperately needed.

Climate change is the most pressing issue facing all of us. But it also presents us with a unique opportunity to reimagine and redesign how we use the space around us. The bicycle needs to be front and center.



The Bicycle: Year-Round Transportation

The 5th season of Ottawa's Winter Cycling Network concluded in the spring of 2020. The winter-maintained network initially started with 40 kilometres of City of Ottawa and National Capital Commission cycle lanes, cycle tracks, and pathways in 2015 - this after a recommendation from the City's 2013 Cycling Plan to promote cycling as a year-round mode of transportation, initially in the city's core. In 2020, another 10 kilometres were added to the network.

Ottawa's 2015 standards for winter maintenance were very typical of other cities exploring the bicycle as a year-round mode of transportation - only committing to clearing the network within 24 hours of a snowfall, and often not clearing the network to bare pavement. By 2020, the City had adjusted its operations to have the entire network cleared within four hours using five dedicated crews - a drastic improvement. And that improvement most likely contributed to the doubling of ridership during the months of January and February between 2015 and 2020. But would these adjustments to operations become permanent?

"Winter Maintenance Is The Key Factor to Getting People on Bicycles"

Research shows the quality of winter maintenance is the key determinant factor to boosting this modal share. In fact, a 2013 McGill University study of winter cycling in Ottawa found "that the improvement of winter maintenance operations on bicycle infrastructure has a positive and significant impact on winter cycling", estimating an increase of 20% to 30%. Whereas, if the infrastructure is not totally clear of ice and snow, ridership would drop by 20% to 40%.

In 2020, the City began a Winter Maintenance Quality Standards review process after 20 years of using the same standards. 2021 should see a report go to Council with recommendations for the new standards. Enshrining those improvements to the Winter Cycling Network as permanent standards, exploring new equipment and best practices, and expanding the network, would be a surefire way to get more people on bikes to get to school, the grocery store, or just picking up a pizza on a Saturday night.



29 High-Risk Intersections

In May 2019, a study to look at high-volume intersections with dangerous interactions between car traffic and people using bicycles was commissioned, only days after a person riding their bicycle was struck and killed by a driver in front of City Hall near the intersection of Laurier Avenue West and Elgin Street.

In September 2020, the released report listed 29 intersections with plans for how to make them safer for those outside of a car. City staff estimated the total cost to carry out the safety improvements in the report at \$32 million dollars and did not recommend to the Transportation Committee to carry out the measures due to the “cost”. But context is always important. Costly road widenings continued to be planned throughout the City, while the Road Safety Action Plan under which these intersections would be improved, remained grossly underfunded. A case of short-term gain, but long-term pain.

The common assumption is that road widenings will make it faster and thus more convenient for drivers to move through an area. However, induced demand tells us the opposite. While road widenings will provide some short-term congestion relief, the extra space then encourages more people to drive, soon filling up those car lanes with more cars. Then we are right back at square one, and short of the funding that could have made these intersections safer, coaxing more people out of their cars - a permanent solution to car traffic congestion.

At some point, if the City of Ottawa wants to start seriously tackling the issues of traffic congestion, reducing GHG emissions, air and noise pollution, and making our City more liveable, residents outside of a car need to feel safe walking or using a bicycle. Reports like this give us concrete actions that the City can take to make our roads safer. There needs to be a shift in priorities to show that the lives of residents are more important than saving a minute or two.



Road Safety Action Plan

In December 2019, Ottawa city council approved the new 2020-2024 Road Safety Action Plan. This follows two previous plans: the first was initiated in 2003 and concluded in 2011, and the second took place between 2012 and 2016. The second Road Safety Action Plan was credited with reducing fatal and major injury collisions on our roads by 14%, according to the City.

The theme of the new plan is “Think Safety, Act Safely” and the 2020 Implementation Plan includes making roads safer for vulnerable road users, reducing collisions at intersections, and addressing “high-risk” motorists.

The goal of the plan is modest: reducing the number of fatal and major injury collisions by 20% by 2024. This is accompanied by a slight increase in funding – \$31.5 million were allocated for road safety programs in 2020, up from \$25 million in 2019. \$4 million of this funding was one-time spending to implement the Road Safety Action Plan with the goal of additional funds to come from photo radar fines.

["City knew bike crash site was dangerous, cycling advocates say"](#)

capital city. Many other Canadian cities have adopted the Vision Zero philosophy, one that aims to achieve zero fatalities and serious injuries on our roads. This is an approach that Ottawa should take as well.



Bike Ottawa's AGM 2020

In September of 2020, Bike Ottawa held its Annual General Meeting online due to ongoing pandemic restrictions for in-person events. Armi De Francia from Transportation Equity TO spoke about bike advocacy and intersectionality, and Sam Hersh from Horizon Ottawa spoke about bridging the gap between social movements and politics.

A recap of activities included a review of Bike Ottawa's advocacy "engine" - the Advocacy Working Group. In 2020, its numerous volunteers and chair tracked city projects and provided input on projects across the city, asking for safe, attractive and comfortable cycling facilities segregated from cars and walking facilities. They collaborated with other non-profits on the People's Official Plan, proposing a more ambitious new Official Plan for the city. Efforts were made to eliminate revert-to-red signalization, endangering people on bikes. Collaborations with City staff included the 2019 Cycling Demographics Study and the Gladstone District Secondary Plan for a future neighbourhood that focuses on people, not cars. Volunteers also consulted on various city projects including the LRT, Public Bike Parking Strategy, and Transportation Master Plan.

Partnerships with various organizations were highlighted, including the EnviroCentre with a "Motherload" fundraiser, the Healthy Transportation Coalition, Velo Canada Bikes, Ecology Ottawa, the Federation of Community Associations, Safer Roads Ottawa for our Lights on Bikes campaign, and finally, 529 Garage to tackle bike theft.

Bike Ottawa was still in the news in 2020...

Infrastructure building:

["City knew bike crash site was dangerous, cycling advocates say"](#)

["Cyclists frustrated, perplexed by hydro pole in middle of bike lane"](#)

["Bikes in big demand, short supply during pandemic"](#)

Road Safety Action Plan:

["Critics urge city to speed up plan to eliminate road fatalities"](#)

["Transportation committee backs new road safety plan despite calls for more ambitious goal"](#)

["New road safety plan to reduce traffic deaths falls short, Ottawa road users argue"](#)

["City reveals new safety plan to reduce deaths, major injuries on roads by 20%"](#)

["Ottawa annonce ses plans d'amélioration de la sécurité routière"](#)

Protected Intersection Funding:

["Making 29 intersections safer for Ottawa cyclists would cost \\$32 million, report says"](#)

["No cash for cycling safety improvements at 29 Ottawa intersections"](#)

["Cyclistes : un plan de 32 M\\$, pour des intersections plus sécuritaires à Ottawa"](#)

COVID-19 and Cycling:

["Des conseillers demandent la fermeture de nouvelles voies sur la rue Bank à Ottawa"](#)

["Bikes in big demand, short supply during pandemic"](#)

["Des « corridors sanitaires » réclamés à Gatineau et à Ottawa"](#)

Policing People on Bikes:

["Gatineau cyclists ticketed at much higher rate"](#)

Winter Biking:

["Vélo d'hiver : des obstacles persistent malgré la mise sur pied de nouveaux projets"](#)

Ottawa's Strategic Plan

["Plan d'action stratégique à Ottawa afin de rendre les routes plus sécuritaires"](#)

Bike Theft:

["Épidémie de vols de vélos à Montréal"](#)