

OPINION

Reimagining Colonel By Drive: it starts with a pilot project



PHOTO BY NEIL SARAVANAMUTTOO

By Erin Maher

Have you enjoyed Colonel By Drive over the years as part of Sunday Bike Days? I remember moving to Old Ottawa South as a student over twenty years ago and was amazed that roads could be closed to cars on such a regular basis. During the pandemic, when the parkways were primarily open to people, I took my kids out every day with that same amazement to see the “cycle city” at their doorstep.

I began to wonder if the fifty-year tradition of Sunday Bike Days could be ready for an evolution and whether these waterfront lands, that face a UNESCO world heritage site, could be reimagined.

When I looked into it, I learned that National Capital Commission (NCC) parkways were never intended for commuter traffic. Rather, they were created as scenic drives to view the sites of the nation’s capital. A leisurely drive when the car was king and movies cost 50 cents.

Times change and commuter car traffic has increasingly become the default. However, there is no requirement to keep it this way. In fact, NCC CEO, Tobi Nussbaum invited the public to rethink the parkways as space for people in a 2020 *Ottawa Citizen* article.

Our new MP Yasir Naqvi also sees this potential. His proposed pilot would see Colonel By Drive closed to cars for one year to allow for active transportation and measure the impacts. This is the type of action that the climate crisis requires.

While MP Naqvi has indicated he is open to other parkways for this pilot, including Queen Elizabeth Driveway, his initial choice of Colonel By Drive represents an incredible opportunity for Old Ottawa South.

Let’s dream big for a minute. Pilot projects are how cities like Paris and Barcelona have revolutionized public spaces, dramatically increasing

active transportation, quality of life and advancing climate action. For example, roadways along the Seine, which is also a UNESCO site, were reclaimed for active transportation and community space.

As an active transportation corridor, Colonel By Drive has remarkable potential. We could safely and comfortably bike to two LRT lines, both universities, the Rideau Centre, the Glebe, Centretown, Old Ottawa East, Sandy Hill and the Market.

Right now, could your kids bike independently to their friend’s house in Old Ottawa East without worrying about cars? Could you and your partner bike side-by-side to a date night on Elgin? Could you cycle to Farm Boy (Rideau) with a kid in tow? Could you bike to the Glebe safely while bypassing the traffic on Bank Street? You could – if the pilot becomes a reality!

With the parkways closed to vehicles, the canal pathways could be retained exclusively for pedestrians, enabling an inclusive experience for those with disabilities and families with small children.

A car-free Colonel By Drive offers possibilities for great spaces beyond the bike. The stunning greenspace between Bronson and Bank could be enhanced with pollinator gardens and would be safer and more enjoyable for play and picnics without a front row seat to vehicular traffic.

We could add boat launches for canoes, kayaks and paddle boards. Relaxing waterside spaces could include floating docks with Muskoka chairs and floating bistros.

In winter, we could finally cross the parkways safely anywhere to skate on the canal! No more grab your skates and run. We could have ski trails, winter bike routes and Winterlude activities.

These are just some of the ideas raised by community members during the Parkway for People reimagining sessions. These ideas

become possible when we prioritize people over cars.

But to make any of this real starts with a pilot. And a pilot only happens if there is enough public support.

There are those who will be against the idea, primarily because they worry about perceived impacts on local traffic. Let’s talk about that. The good news is that the sky didn’t fall during the summer closure to cars. A one-year pilot can give us important

year-round data to make decisions and adjustments as needed.

Show your support for the pilot by contacting MP Yasir Naqvi at [yasir.naqvi@parl.gc.ca](mailto:yasir.naqvi@parl.gc.ca).

Inspired? Join others working to prioritize people and active transportation on the NCC parkways. Email [erin@parkwaysforpeople.ca](mailto:erin@parkwaysforpeople.ca) or visit <https://parkwaysforpeople.ca>.

*Erin Maher is the co-lead of Parkway for People, a coalition of individuals and organizations working for transformative change on the NCC parkways. She is also a co-founder of the Enviro Crew Old Ottawa South.*

Join Parkway for People

Email: [erin@parkwaysforpeople.ca](mailto:erin@parkwaysforpeople.ca)  
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