



Some random downtown walking observations

Peter Long, pjl@Whitehorsewalks.com

October 28, 2018

... it is not the density in itself that is sought after, but rather the quality that the dense urban environment provides, in the form of proximity to work, cultural offerings, activities, parks, and so on. The experience of having a short distance between activities and one's home is precisely what is considered to be the primary comfort factor for the city-dweller, according to surveys about urban living. It is the bustling city with a high degree of interaction between people that is attractive and this requires places where people can meet.

So it's a matter of creating density in the right way. We need to build densely enough that the in-between spaces remain and provide space for the very qualities that create a good living environment. When the existing environment is to be changed, we have an excellent opportunity to start from the current circumstances of a place and find out what it lacks. What supplementary values might the densification bring? Here is an opportunity to redo and improve.

...As a result of sound reflection between building facades, city streets might have elevated sound levels, for example. This problem can be reduced with insulated, angled facades. ... Tyre friction is the dominant sound on streets with traffic speeds of over 50 kilometres per hour. On city streets with speed limits of 40 kilometres per hour or lower, the dominant sound is engine noise.

*Urban Density Done Right
Ideas on densification of cities and other communities*

*by The Swedish National Board of Housing,
Building and Planning May 2017*



How do we foster a vibrant walkable downtown core?

This document is a selection of thoughts, mostly focussed on downtown walkability. The 2019 Downtown Parking Management Plan noted: As the Downtown continues to attract more population, there is also a need for the City to promote quality public space to maintain the vibrancy of the area. Climate change should mean drive less, walk more, build more compact cities.

Densification and walking go hand in hand. A couple of aspects of densification are to provide access to open space and not create pollution. We have open space on the other side of the river, and pollution can be a problem in a river valley. At a minimum, we don't want people to have to drive just to go for a neighbourhood walk. We need to provide more natural walking options downtown.

The Hospital Ridge Trail runs along the river above downtown. Go outside at intermission at the Old Fire Hall and you'll surely say, "I'd love to walk there!" This ridge is beautiful to look at, even more beautiful to walk on — but getting there means a long walk or drive around via the Robert Campbell Bridge. Look across and you'll seldom see anyone there. Densification also looks at acoustics. The Hospital – Long Lake area is really downtown's wilderness, a chance to escape the hustle and bustle and noise of downtown!

Look at how few people are around downtown on Saturday afternoon or in the evenings. We are missing out on the economic value of our trails. A pedestrian bridge would be transformational for the people living, working and visiting downtown, not to mention those going to and from the hospital, and the trail network.





A lively downtown core

More people walking than driving and good public transportation can build life in the downtown. A vibrant downtown means more efficient municipal infrastructure.

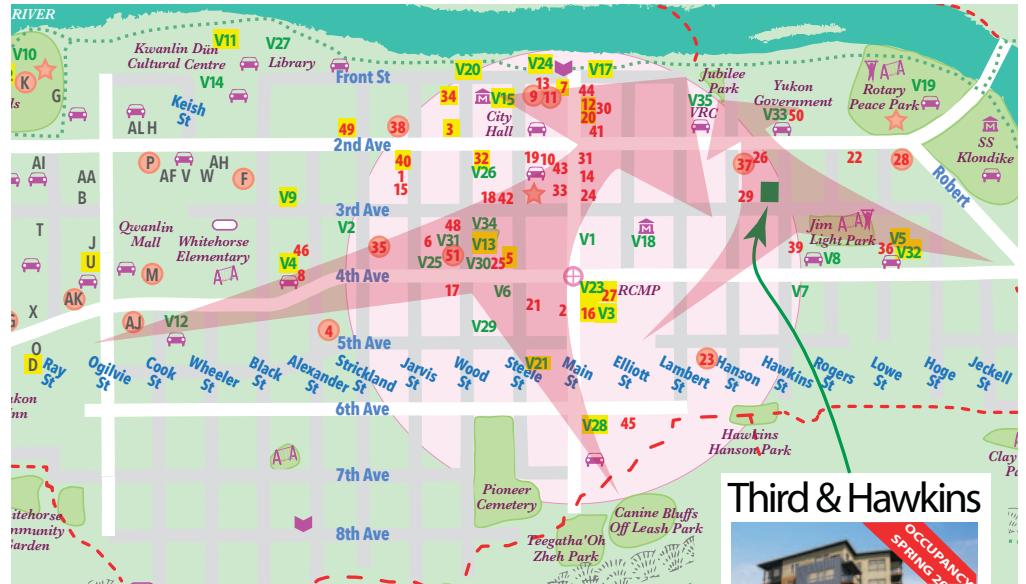
Looking at a blowup of this downtown map (upper right), it's clear (see red arrows) that a pedestrian bridge will attract people through the heart of downtown, giving the community a very strong walking focus, a healthy Main Street. An iconic bridge should be our goal.

Parking

What the above map also allows is a way of analyzing parking needs. In compiling this map, it became clear that the south end, business district part of town, has a parking problem and there's little 'spare' land for parking lots. The north end is more car friendly with its malls and parking lots. Residential build-up along the waterfront will be hard on parking as this area densifies. Getting more people walking in the downtown core makes huge sense.

However, many people won't pay \$4/day to park at the city lot on the end of Main Street. Is the problem distance or do people just want free parking? The two photos below, 11:30 AM, Oct 15, 2019, show lots of empty meters close to Main Street. Will people want to pay to park in a municipal parking garage?

The escarpment area between Hawkins and Rogers streets is presently being used for construction debris. It could be a parking lot, at least until the need for downtown land becomes such that this land is cleaned up. A five-minute walkshed (red circle) from there would almost allow people to walk to work in the main government building!! This would be part of a method to allow neighbourhood street parking to serve residential and commercial purposes. It would also be part of making a quieter neighbourhood.



Winter – snow

In speaking of a 2nd Avenue Corridor Study, the 2018 Downtown Plan refers to “Improved left-turn functionality/potential for central left-turn lane”. Covered-over road markings and being a winter city is a topic we should address. Sidewalk clearing is very uneven, especially where there are no sidewalks. There’s examples in the coming pages. Winter walkability would make some interesting planning sessions.

Changing weather patterns have made for very slippery conditions for walking the past few years, both spring and fall. A safe (plowed and gritted) set of downtown walks, including the Waterfront, Millennium and Lower Escarpment trails would be a great asset. The switchback at the corner of Lewes Blvd. and Hospital Road really needs attention as it’s often slippery. This is downtown’s main walking access to the Hospital trails.

Discouraging walking

With a bus stop, a park, playgrounds, summer food stands, and the Yukon River as destinations, this blocked crossing is kind of an odd situation. How did this become a non-crossing? What about the south side of the intersection and the two Rogers Street crossings? It almost seems that crossing is illegal along this stretch of road.

Having no zebra crossings between Hanson and Lowe streets is far too long in a walkable city. This is almost 250 metres. Note that between Hanson and Main streets, all intersections have two marked crossings.

More formalized crossings would slow down 2nd Avenue traffic, and make 2nd Avenue quieter. We should encourage walkability in this residential part of town.

There are a number of day care places in the area, evidenced by little kid parades wandering the sidewalks. They should be able to get to Rotary Peace Park playgrounds without having to walk along busy roads. Destinations include: Yukon Legislative Assembly, entrance to Millennium Trail, Rotary Peace Park, SS Klondike National Historic Site, the Visitor Reception Centre, Jim Light Park ... Downtown densification is important. Downtown South has a growing population — Hawkins Street alone has 6 condos. Note that the Yukon Government has around 300 people working in its main administration building.



Crossing sanity

We were walking east along Hawkins Street from 5th Avenue. The sidewalk is on the north side until 4th, then the zebra crossing is on the south side at 4th, then the sidewalk is on the north again. So to use the zebra crossing one must make an extra two crossings. Or, cross on north side of intersection without a formal crosswalk and have a driver point that you should cross at the other corner (which is what happened to us).



Help for north end of 2nd Avenue

The north end of town is also growing. The 2018 Downtown Plan talks of compromised walkability in the north end. New condos, firehall, hotels, innovation centre, cultural centre, daycares, mosque, library, malls, liquor store, waterfront, Lumel, Shipyards Park ...

There needs to be walking infrastructure to match. A crossing between the new hotel and the innovation centre and its café is clearly missing. Between Black and Ogilvie streets it again feels like an illegal activity to cross along here.



The 2018 plan talks of traffic speeds being a major safety concern and calls for a 2nd Avenue Corridor Study. Studies and implementing results can be a long process — we need a shorter timeline for pedestrian safety.

Confusing signs

Road signs say bikes are in the traffic lane, on the bridge. But other says bikes are on the sidewalk or pathway. Mix of old and new signs? Is idea that fast moving bikes go on the road?



Compromised walkability

The 2018 Downtown Plan talked about compromised walkability in Downtown North. In reality, it's the story in a number of situations in the downtown. Understandable in some parts of town but one hopes that eventually walking would be a bigger part of the downtown story.



Sidewalks or parking?

Businesses use the land between the road and their property as a parking extension to their lot. It's annoying along here in the summer. In the winter it makes a walker have to walk along the road to get by.

Could there be a sidewalk, or parking barriers along this stretch of 2nd by 4th?

Note that until there is a connector trail between the Waterfront Trail and the Airport and Lower Escarpment trails, this road is the direct connector route. It's very unattractive, and somewhat unsafe!

Where did the sidewalk go?

I was walking down Wood Street on my way to Lepage Park, when all of a sudden, the sidewalk became a path into the cemetery.

The start of a desire line shows that people will continue to walk where they think the sidewalk would be — in other words, straight ahead.



Sport Yukon building

Local walkers might want to enter this building — used by senior groups, sports organizations and the city's recreation department — through the parking lot. They would be coming through the park, or along the alley. It would be simple to take down a couple of sections of chain so people don't need to step over it, or wonder if they are wrecking the grass.



Obstruction

A person could easily walk into this bench, especially if it was at dusk. Benches in Jim Light Park could easily be placed on the grass beside the paths.

This park would also benefit from tasteful low-level lighting.



Changing times

Sometimes use of the city land between the road and a property is pretty neat, inventive, attractive. Then too, landscaping can sometimes discourage people from being there. When getting out of a parked vehicle, without a sidewalk or grassy edge, a passenger has a hard bit of navigation, scrambling over rock fields and uneven slopes.

Are pedestrians supposed to walk in the middle of the road or on the grass? Or are they to cross the road to the sidewalk on the other side. They must then cross back mid block if going to the new café here on Hawkins Street.

There should be a walkability aspect for the city land between the property line and the street/sidewalk.

Yikes!

This letdown for vehicle access (by Yukon Cinema) is steep and sudden. I wasn't paying attention and almost fell!

Are there standards the city can use to make sidewalks safer?



Fall hazard

I was crossing on the east side of bridge and not paying a lot of attention but going to follow the paved path into the park.

I got a jolt as my foot dropped down suddenly. My balance is pretty good so it was a surprise only. I could easily see a fall. Or perhaps a baby stroller could drop down, or a motorized wheelchair.

Paved path problems

This edge of the Waterfront Trail, between the VRC and the wharf, is falling away.

The barrier stops people wandering out onto the edge. A fix should happen here before it becomes worse.

A walk along a promenade should have a sense of carefree. One often has to step off the edge of a paved trail when there's lots of people or fast bikes. We shouldn't have to be alert to whacking a leg against a concrete barrier!



Here's the paved Airport Perimeter Trail (immediate right) across from Wasson. It looks like a pretty half-hearted repair? But why was it even necessary?

This piece of Airport Perimeter trail (far right) keeps having problems.

As does this section of Waterfront Trail (below left) and Millennium Trail (below right).

How can we build these paved paths with more longevity? Is it a matter of better base preparation? The effect of paved path problems on people walking is not like a pothole for a car, it's a tripping hazard.





Head-level hazards!

Why place signs at eye level in the middle of sidewalks, or right at the edge of sidewalks? Walking is meant to be a pleasant stress-free activity, with time to chat or think or just observe. These obstacles are very unexpected!

Since I had cataract surgery and don't wear glasses anymore, I'm much more conscious of how exposed my eyes are without them!



The focus on cars and bikes can blind those putting up signs

Here's a classic example of a sign without regard for the primary sidewalk users — pedestrians. The back of this head height sign blends nicely with the pole so is effectively camouflaged!

Note that people could be looking at Riverside Grocery and perhaps thinking of going there — ouch!



Hole, Black and 2nd

If the top plywood is removed, a person cutting across this corner could fall into the hole. Who would be responsible?

OUCH!

With developing trail use comes more hazards popping up.



Settling paving

Will this be a bigger problem one day? It will be a tripping hazard for sure. What is this pipe for? It's opposite Sanchez Cantina.



YIKES!

This is quite near the Rotary Centennial Bridge along the waterside trail.



Base of an old signpost

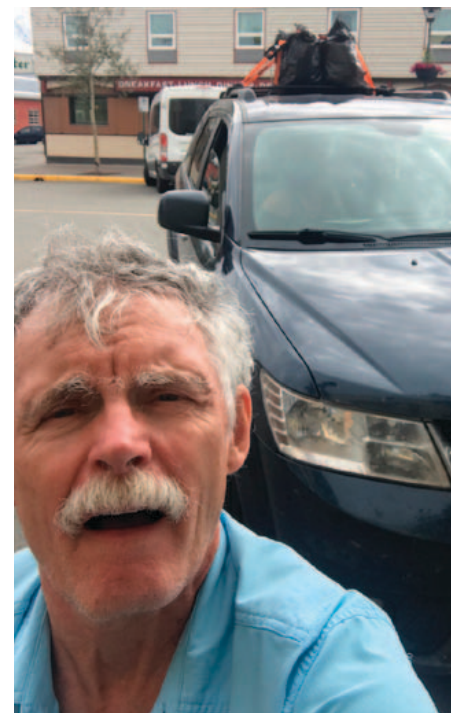
This is easy to get to. It's at the end of Strickland Street. This would hurt!!





Electrical

I've become more aware of various utility boxes and the derelict air they can give to our public spaces. For such serious pieces of infrastructure, defects should be treated more seriously. And is there any way of dealing with their graffiti problems, some way they could make these less abandoned looking? Paint?



Idling

Baked goes to great lengths to make an outdoor community space on the sidewalk. This car was left idling and when I asked owner to shut it off, he said that it was hot and people in the waiting closed car needed air conditioning! Perhaps signage could state the obvious?

Redesign?

This garbage bin/sidewalk placement should be fixed. Lepage Park is a great concert venue in the summer and watching people sidestep this obstacle to the park is interesting. Keep the shrubs in any redesign.



Downtown South access to the Airport Perimeter Trail

The goal: getting more people out and about, providing more walking options. People want loop walks of varying times and distances. They walk at all hours, some even as a noon hour event. There are a number of routes up the escarpment, each for certain uses, certain times of year, wet, dry, icy, slippery. Over time some good non-technical routes are being fixed up by residents. Stairs are not best for some people: boring, hard on joints, ...

The Black Street Staircase shows residents' desire to get up on the escarpment. The Downtown South Master Plan called for a staircase mid-town around Rogers Street. This desire is evidenced by these ropes (above photos), placed to help people up. The trail is a natural extension of the old road up the escarpment that slid away years ago. Stairs in this area will open up great walking possibilities and create a strong focus on active living.

The 2018 Downtown Plan showed the idea of Hawkins Street as a greenway street, however with poor crossings of 2nd Avenue at Hawkins Street, there is no easy access to Rotary Peace Park and the river! Still, a greenway street with a river at one end and stairs at the other, with a parking lot, looks interesting.



Airport Perimeter Trail

There are a few spots along the Airport Perimeter Trail where the trail needs help. The left picture shows a slippery spot by a culvert where the trail is wearing away. The right photo shows a spot above Taylor–Drury streets where the fence itself should be moved inland.

Downtown walking vibrancy depends on trails. Densification needs access to greenspaces. These are neighbourhood trails and broader community trails. Many more people could be out and about. These are great destinations and very close to downtown. There's often people walking up here.



Multi-neighbourhood use — Airport Toe Trail

While the Downtown South staircase will be very popular, a key piece of trail infrastructure is the trail at the south end of the airport. With more people living downtown, we need more opportunities for longer walks, without driving.

For active living, it will give Riverdale another downtown walking option, via the Rotary Centennial Bridge. It will give downtown residents another way of accessing the Millennium Trail, and the Miles Canyon area. It will give above-the-airport residents, especially Copper Ridge and future Beyond Copper Ridge residents, access to the river.

For those who find going down a set of stairs hard on the joints, this will be a nicer descent from the escarpment.





When will this concrete pad fall?

See the Hougen photo (on p. 14) of the Air Force housing on the escarpment, at the top of the old road up. Above Hanson Street, on the Airport Perimeter Trail, is this old cement piece (old street?) that will fall one day. The cracks are growing.

Sometimes people stand on it. Will it fall when someone is standing on it? Will it cause more erosion below?

Along the Yukon River

The Millennium Trail is easily one of Whitehorse's top attractions. Yet it seems that since the trail has been established, the river seems to be winning the battle over land use.

There needs to be a concerted drive to rip rap the river bank along the area behind FH Collins. We watch yearly as the river ice plucks away at the bank. It doesn't bode well for a long-term trail. With one very large river user just upstream from this area it would seem a good potential partnership.

At the same time, doing a little promotion on the Macaulay Tramway between Yukon Energy's dam and the Robert Campbell Bridge would make sense.



Supporting residents

Trails along the base of the escarpment are so important that someone built this bridge. It fills a local need and could use a bit of carpentry help.

How to discourage camping?

There are many places where people end up camping or partying in our greenbelts. The fire danger in this time of wildfires getting more ferocious should be a wake-up call. The garbage is also a pain. This elaborate camp, just behind the ball diamonds on the South Access, is one example.

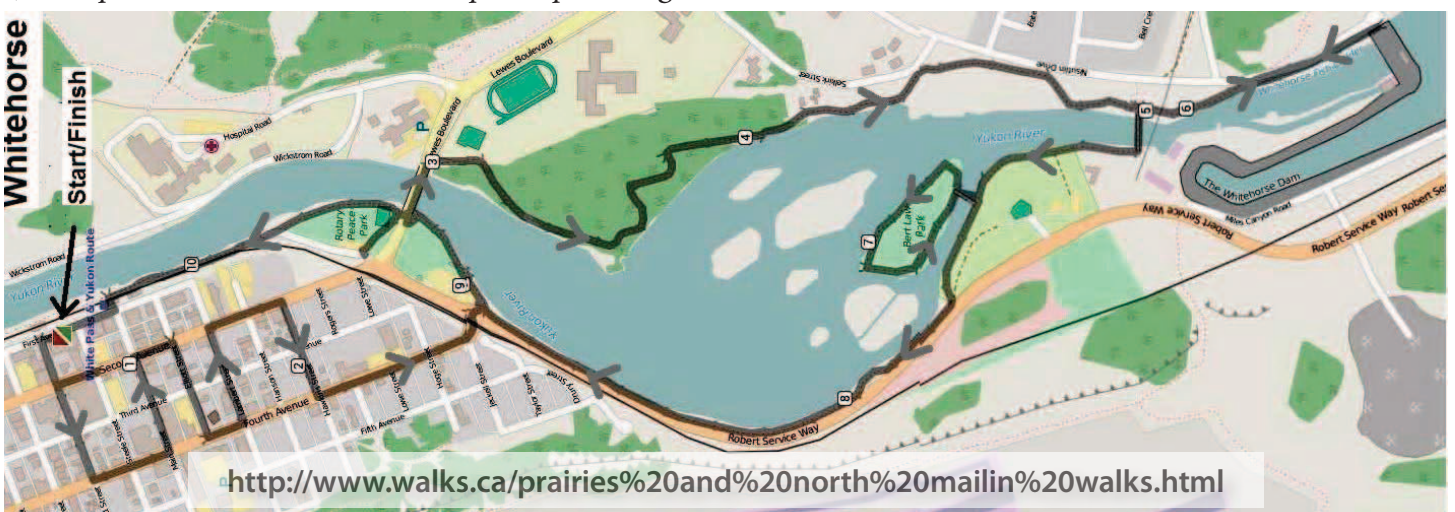
Generally, I think that incorporating existing trails into the walking network and having more public eyes on spaces like this one is part of the answer. A win-win proposition.



Trail safety

The Canadian Volkssport Federation, an international walking group, promotes the route below as the Yukon's only permanent >10km trail. In correspondence and meetings, they have stated that they would love better options, but they also want to promote trails with good waymarking to their members. These people come from all around the world and may not have the trail skills needed to hike here without a bit of trail upgrades, mostly around waymarking.

For the fun of it, I've picked a selection of >10km candidate loops starting from the VRC. (see http://whitehorsewalks.com/_loops/LoopWalkingTrailsVRC.html)



Densification and a vibrant downtown

We have an embarrassment of riches in our trails. To plan for more people living downtown, we must facilitate strong connections to nature. This map shows a set of core loop trails and their infrastructure needs. Making connections is one step to make downtown a real walking destination, well befitting a northern wilderness city.



Many of the ideas proposed in this booklet, though they might seem extreme today, will be very much appreciated by people once they happen. Some have very little cost. Some are plain safety situations.

Would a VRC–Hospital pedestrian crossing be worth the money if it brought more life to the downtown core? Would it be worth it if it encouraged more people to live downtown? Think back to some of the community discussion around the Millennium Trail and the Rotary Centennial Bridge. Today, many people use them regularly — and they come from more than just Riverdale and Downtown. Or look at the 1922 Robert E. Lowe Suspension Bridge. Miles Canyon is one of our top local and visitor destinations. Beauty, a place of awe, and there's this bridge...