

## Downtown: walkability, active transportation, recreation

*“It’s simple: people will walk if we create places and spaces where they want to walk. Unlike standalone promotional campaigns, improved walkability generates lasting increases in walking rates. It transforms behaviour.”*

*Draft 2016 Canadian National Action Strategy for Walking*

As Whitehorsewalks, I’ve written one walker’s perspective, mine, of downtown Whitehorse, the wilderness city.

Having recently moved back downtown, I wanted to look at downtown walkability. Walkability is more than downtown needing better, safer street crossings, and needing more sidewalks, needing clearing in winter.

Walkability means accessible, it means nearby places to walk to, enticing surroundings, community feel, people centered, friendly, small shops, a vibrant business scene, music, arts, entertainment, of more things to do. Empty storefronts, abandoned-feeling rundown buildings, fenced off empty lots don’t signal walkability.

For me, downtown walkability in a northern wilderness city also means easy access to our natural spaces, forests, rivers and so on. I love that I can step out my door and walk in the woods, without driving. I like variety, longer hikes. I believe that recreational trail walking in nature will result in people who’d more likely think of active transportation, resulting in less vehicle dependency.

As a wilderness city, Whitehorse combines abundant nature, clean air, with both urban street walking and wilderness/greenspace/trail walking, and a creative cultural society. A walkable downtown can offer residents a strong work life balance, but will also appeal to visitors. A vibrant downtown will benefit all city residents.

However, downtown could have much better access to nature, to trails. It could be an even more desirable place to live, where people mostly don’t need to drive a vehicle just to go for a walk! Access to nature means more than seeing trees on a cliff across the river, it also means having a trail network that allow us to walk in these places!

There’s many walking destinations from downtown: Chadburn Lake Park, Airport Perimeter Trail, Yukon River Trail, the Hospital area. But some people, locals and visitors alike, are somewhat fearful about wilderness — in particular, wildlife (bears!) and getting lost. Having well built, well signed, well mapped, attractive trails can encourage people to be more active.

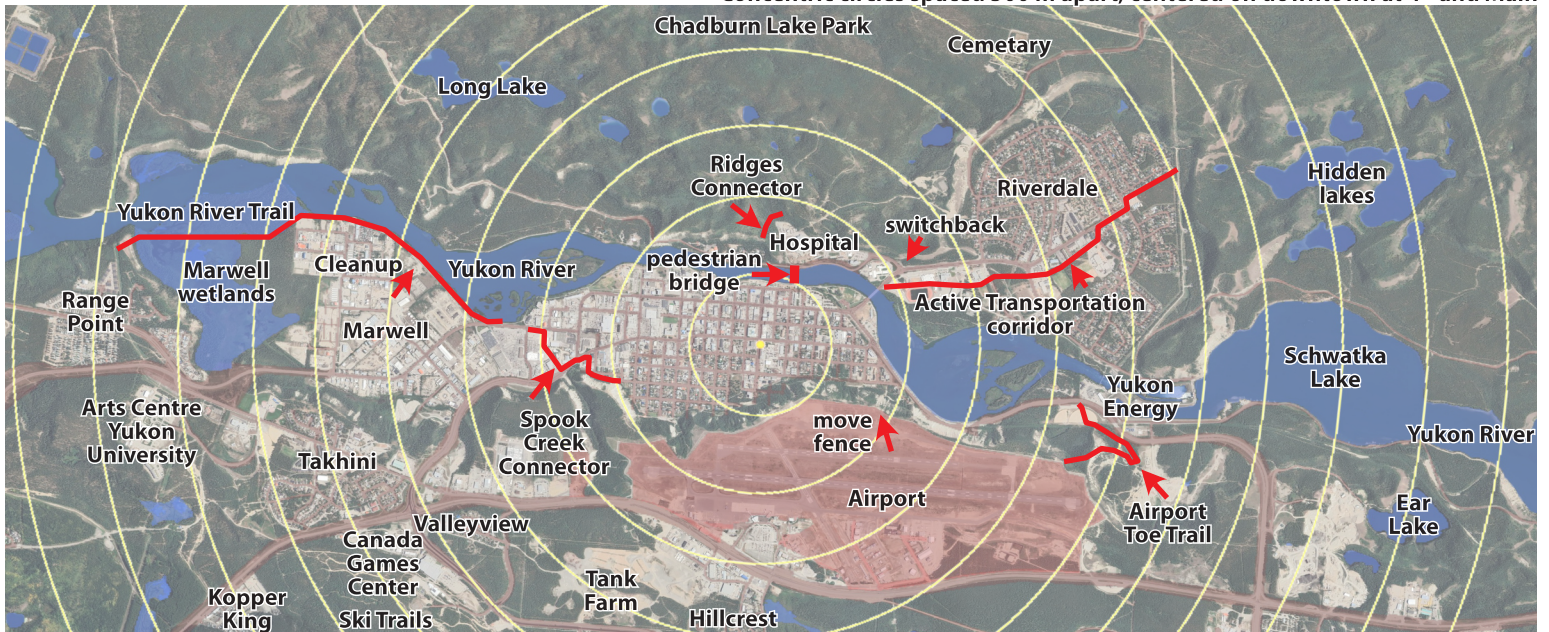
Primarily, this document is to get more people talking, to encourage working with the City, the Downtown Residents Association, and other associations, to think about a walking vision for our downtown.

At the same time that I was preparing this paper, multiple escarpment slides happened and the city closed sections of 3 major downtown trails, empathizing the importance of variety in our walks, and the effects of climate changes.

Peter Long, July, 2022, Whitehorsewalks.com,  
Yukon Director, National Hiking Trail of Canada

PS: I reference walking as it’s the most common mode of transportation; bicyclists share the same trails, however there’s many bike groups to promote their views.

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### Airport Perimeter trail, an old downtown trail

*Our easiest, loveliest views of downtown, Grey Mountain and the river are just a short hike up the airport escarpment. The perimeter trail is often used by many city residents, accessing it from downtown and the ends of the airport along the highway.*

**Responsibility for Airport Perimeter Trail:** This is an old popular trail. The 1957 NRC report on the escarpment said to move activities far enough from the edge and then to fence the airport. However, over the decades the escarpment eroded and in one spot, the fence has become too close to the edge. Last year the city closed the trail. One simple fix is a simple bridge (photo shows where a similar drop happens on the tramway trail above Miles Canyon.) However, easiest would be to just move the airport fence, likely with a non-metal one.



Asked about reopening the trail, the City said ‘*Transportation Aviation Branch must be approached directly as the city does not have influence over this jurisdiction.*’ ‘*currently no opportunities have been identified as suitable locations for a bypass passage considering the unpredictable condition of this steep escarpment.*’ ‘*engineers will study the escarpment next year.*’ ‘*Administration intends to take the lead on this matter once greater understanding of the area is acquired.*’

YG airport said ‘*not currently considering adjusting... fence .... to facilitate the unofficial trail.*’ Various airport plans that talk about the importance of facilitating this important community trail’s existence.

**Escarpment landslides, 2022:** Recently there were a number of landslides. In early Whitehorse, a 1900 photo shows workers clearing a slide during railway construction. A 1953 photo shows a Steele Street slide requiring moving 6 homes. Before the City expropriated many escarpment homes in 1959, Corky Repka had to build a berm each fall to constrain flow from the escarpment. The Repkas lived in the Wye area (near the recent Jeckell slide).

The reality is, most of the slides will not affect the ability of people to safely continue to use the perimeter trail. Moving the airport fence inland at necessary spots along the eastern side of the perimeter trail won’t bring it any closer to runways than the current situation.

Hopefully dialog happens and residents get the airport fence moved without needing a petition. The City and YG airport should be good corporate neighbours with our airport trail.

**Black Street:** There are a few ways of getting up and down the escarpment. For some of us, stairs can be hard on the joints. Luckily there is also a delightful switchback, an old road-like ascent and a sandy chute route. Discouraging bike use as well as discouraging shortcuts on the switchback will allow it to be made even better. Perhaps handrails at corners?

We’d get better winter use of the Airport Perimeter Trail, if we deal with the snowdrifts that form along the crest of the road-like route. Encouraging more fat tire bike and kick sled use could lead to the perimeter trail being fat-tire-packed all the way to the south end of the escarpment— a community win!

**Airport Toe Trail, southern descent:** Getting down from the escarpment is a missing piece that will make walking more attractive for downtown and Riverdale residents. The hill behind the ball diamonds on Robert Service Way has been used to get down, but even better, will be to build the descent trail in the Airport Toe area by the new dirt bike track. A well-thought-out trail can come off the hill, loop back under the powerlines towards the dam, go through the woods behind the ball diamonds and then cross over to the campground, the Millennium Trail and the Rotary Centennial Bridge.

## Yukon River Trail, traditional First Nation routes

Many cities have evolved aspects of their cultural identity growing around a river. Pedestrian bridges and riverside walkways can help make walkable cities. Whitehorse has grown over the years from a town focused on the riverboats, to today's subdivisions strung out along the river.

But long before that, First Nation people used trails on both sides of the river between Laberge and Marsh lakes. Kwanlin Dün published a community booklet *Back to the River*. Still today we walk on pieces of these old routes.

*A long linear trail through the city would create many loop trail possibilities. On the west side of the river the trail would go in and out of development; on the east side, there's Riverdale and a park in the south, and in the north except for a few clusters of residences and powerlines, roads and sewage treatment, the land will remain more natural until the City expands here.*

Think about a long distance hiking trail that stay along the escarpment edge, catching breezes, incredible vistas, easily followable. There's an opportunity for a wilderness hut.

Construction and maintenance of a long distance trail will be an ongoing project. With a long term vision that Whitehorse will continue to grow, and community desire to keep some parts as a natural experience, the east side of the river seems an obvious place to have a long distance trail.

**1-East side, going north along the river:** there are often trails along the escarpments above the river. The draft OCP projects that the City will need to expand into the 'North End'. Prior to that, there will be a need for bridges across the river.

A pedestrian bridge near Whistle Bend will give Whistle Bend better recreational walking. Before any development can happen at the 'North End' area past Long Lake, there must be a large vehicle bridge. It will have specific requirements, however it must integrate a Yukon River Trail under it (ie, not by a pedestrian crosswalk!)

**2-East side, going south along the river:** There are many existing riverside trails in Chadburn Lake Park. They provide great hiking and except for a couple of sections, one can get almost to the city limits. From there is sort of a route all the way to the blue bridge on the Alaska Highway, mostly passing through Kwanlin Dün lands.

**3-West side, Yukon River Trail, city center:** The Waterfront and Millennium trails give a solid grounding to the trail.

While designated shared use, non-motorized, at times it feels like a bike expressway. It will be worse as eBikes and eScooters become more popular. There's talks of using the railway for trails but better for Millennium and Waterfront walkability would using railway as the bike expressway here.

Sections of the Millennium Trail will be lost as the river continues to erode the banks. The City should recognize the importance of protecting the banks and its delightful dirt path. These dirt paths, one the Macauley Tramway, show that some people like a more natural soft footing and intimate atmosphere. A small bridge between the Veale and Steele

benches would facilitate this and complement the new overflow outfall bridge being built.

Winter use requires a balance between gritting and clearing. Drainage should be built in at places. When snow melts, large icy pools of water form that can last for days, for weeks. Rather than addressing recurring drainage problems, this past year the City closed a whole section of trail in Robert Service Campground; this then caused community loss of the Bert Law Park loop trail. The City needs to rebuild the problematic section of trail or build a boardwalk over the bad sections.

A crushed gravel path around Bert Law Park would provide a delightful riverine outing for people wanting an accessible nature trail. Also, keep parking open at Robert Service Campground park in winter. Wolf Creek Campground shows that a crushed gravel trail works.

**4-West side, Yukon River Trail, North:** It'll pass Marwell wetlands, Range Point, McIntyre Creek, Whistle Bend cliffs, going around Whistle Bend as it heads to the city limits.

A necessary piece of city trail, the Yukon River Trail will allow people from Porter Creek and Whistle Bend to get downtown, using a trail alongside the river or on the cliffs above the river, instead of going alongside the edge of the increasingly busy, one day-to-be-four-lane Mountainview/Copper/Quartz roads.

Going downriver from downtown along the river past Walmart could one day be a lovely walk. While a fully connected river trail isn't currently possible due to on-going hydrocarbon cleanup in Marwell, in the short term, most of this route could be worked on. A connector should also be aimed at getting Takhini residents and Yukon University users onto the river trail. We need to continue to monitor the clean-up and ensure that the trail along the river doesn't get blocked over the years it will take to clean this site.

Once past the Marwell industrial area, the trail will pass through the Marwell wetlands. This could become a treasured area with interpreted trails and a boardwalk connecting to a footbridge over the creek. A well-thought-out ascent of the hill will get to the spectacular slopes of Range Point, looking out over the wetlands and the broader river valley.

Going through Range Point and then across McIntyre Creek to Whistle Bend is another segment that, while currently sort of possible, should be made into a route that encourages people in this area to walk or bike downtown. A new creek crossing will also add variety to the trail experiences for the rapidly filling Whistle Bend. The Yukon River Trail will be a godsend as it passes north to the City limits. We're talking some 10,000 residents for Whistle Bend alone.

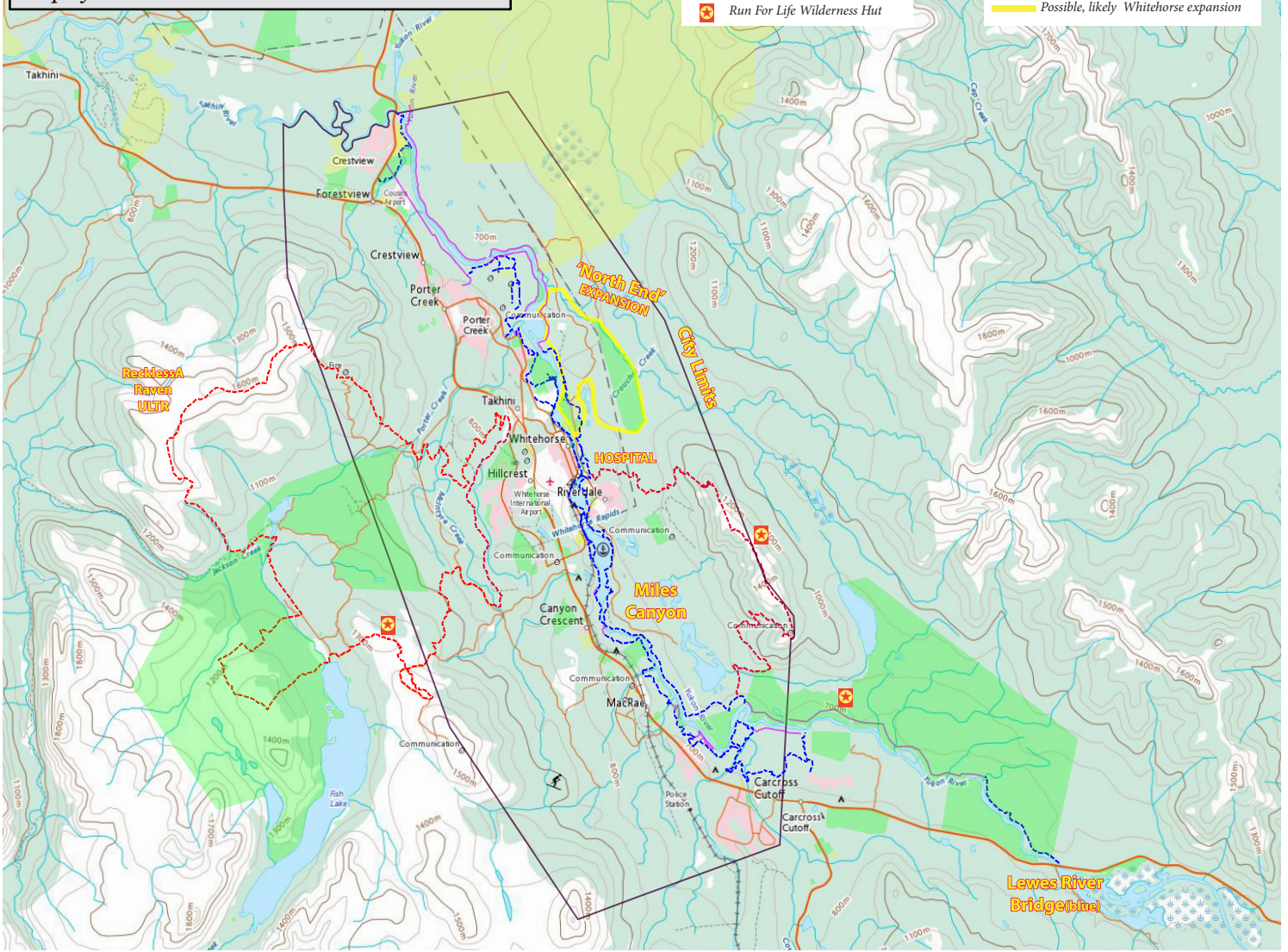
**5-West side, Yukon River Trail, South:** Schwatka Lake, Miles Canyon, the Hepburn Tramway, Wolf Creek are some of the jewels as the trail passes Spruce Hill to the city limits.

Just before the railway was built, the Hepburn Tramway went along the river, bypassing the canyon and the rapids. It went from today's American Laundry (by Basalt Creek behind Macrae), to near the visitor pulloff by the eagle's nest just past Robert Service Campground. When the first cars arrived in Whitehorse, sections of the tramway were repurposed as



Map of Yukon River Trail and Wilderness Huts

- Kwanlin Dün First Nation
- Ta'an Kwach'an Council
- Yukon River Trail
- Possible Routing
- Reckless Raven
- Possible, likely Whitehorse expansion
- +
 Run For Life Wilderness Hut



(today's) Miles Canyon Road. Remnants of this 1898 trail are still quite walkable or could be fixed where degraded.

However today, from Robert Service campground to Schwatka Lake, people must walk in the ditch along the edge of Robert Service Way to pass Yukon Energy operations. This should be made safer and more inviting.

The south end of the Yukon Energy complex could easily have a bypass connector trail through the woods opposite the LNG plant that would give access to the trail network going to Miles Canyon, bypassing a large section of road walking.

An alternate way here that would be quite popular would be a Schwatka Lake promenade. It would follow the edge of the Miles Canyon Road. It should of course be an accessible path, perhaps crushed gravel instead of pavement.

Where the Miles Canyon Road leaves the lake and goes up the hill beside the old Grant cabin, a better way over this hill (Goat Trail hill) needs to be made. The trail runners have a bypass trail in the woods but it's not great for those who need a flatter route. People are sometimes seen walking on the roadway, dodging motorhomes and busses. Incorporating the existing Hepburn Tramway in the woods would be good.

At the top of Goat Trail hill, the Yukon River trail can follow the Hepburn Tramway past Miles Canyon all the way to the American Laundry, with only a few pieces of trail to rebuild.

From American Laundry, various trails take one to below the escarpment above Macrea Creek. So also as the city was able to make the great Copper Ridge Connector Trail, we need one here. This would essentially connect a Yukon River Trail all the way from Downtown past Spruce Hill to the city limits.

### Lower Escarpment to Waterfront connection

*2<sup>nd</sup> by 4<sup>th</sup> or Ogilvie are jarring interruptions to this route. There are many residences on the north end of the waterfront with still more buildings to come. Residents face a very unappealing walk if they want to walk to the Lower Escarpment Trail.*

Connecting the lower Escarpment Trail to the Waterfront Trail is an important and fairly straightforward step in improving downtown recreational walking.

A better route could be to come behind the Downtown Urban Gardens. Then follow the alley behind Builder's Supplyland and cross 4<sup>th</sup> at the crosswalk. The route would also use the crosswalk at Quartz and Chilkoot Way to connect to the Waterfront Trail.

**Spook Creek connector:** This part is key. A small linear parkette could follow the ditch/creek behind the business properties. This would be an asset to these businesses, complementing existing landscaping.

### Robert Campbell Bridge—bottleneck or gateway?

*The bridge is a traffic jam as people access schools and drive downtown. Walking at times is very unappealing, in winter it can be dangerously icy. This is downtown's closest entrance to Chadburn Lake Park.*

**Crocus Ridge switchback:** Access to Crocus Ridge trails in the winter is badly needed for downtown and Riverdale. The present state encourages people to drive to get to the Hospital – Long Lake – Magnusson Trails.

Last summer I was told that the switchback opposite the Department of Ed building would be fixed to allow winter use. The problem is the sidehill trail cut into the hill is too narrow and with erosion also happening, the trail fills with snow, making the lower parts unusable. Schools occasionally use the woods above the switchback. As a community service, possibly an outdoor ed program at one of the high schools there could take on the job of keeping the switchback usable.

**Winter sidewalk clearing:** The sidewalks on the bridge get very icy sometimes while the vehicle road surface is bare pavement. Sanding happens occasionally with sand thrown out, but with sparse coverage. Yet these sidewalks are used by school kids, active transportation, people walking the Millennium Trail, ... they can get quite slippery.

**Bus lane project:** This new project is set to start soon. How will it affect the trailhead access? Will snow removal continue to block trailhead access?

**Traffic lights/crosswalk:** From the school side to the Hospital Road intersection, even at prime school hours, there's not enough time to even reach the center of the road before the walk signal turns red. In general, this means most users must start to cross while the walk figure is flashing red.

**Under bridge connectivity:** There's a passage between Rotary Park and the SS Klondike under the bridge. It needs frequent sanding or drainage or a small wooden boardwalk as it gets very icy. The Riverdale side of the bridge would benefit from a similar passage.

**Connecting to Wickstrom Road:** If Department of Ed fixes up the fence and fallen trees along the river, access to Wickstrom Road would be better. An active transportation plan map showed this as a future paved path. Crushed gravel would suffice.

Making a better ascent trail from the road to behind the Crocus Ridge Residence will help those walking back and forth to the hospital or the residence from downtown.

**Active transportation corridor, Riverdale:** Creating a green transportation corridor from the bridge to the foot of Peewee Hill would add walking options. This pathway would go by every school in Riverdale. This route mostly exists. Making it a crushed gravel trail with low-level lighting and priority crosswalks would go a long way to encouraging more walking, biking, kick sledding.

## Alaska Highway, a major barrier

*"Where can I cross the road?" Highway's answer: "Pedestrian crossings will be provided at signalized intersections."*

People from both the above-the-airport and the coming South Growth Area and Tank Farm neighbourhoods will need to come downtown. There will likely be at least about 20,000 people in this area one day. Downtown people will want to visit them. They all will need to cross the highway. Either the Yukon Government and the City band together to make this attractive for active transportation, or downtown will have all these people wanting to drive their single occupancy vehicles and looking for a place to park.

An underpass at the north end of the airport would show a vision of the importance of recreation, active transportation.

To cross at the south end of the airport, a plan is needed that works for recreation and active transportation. It should connect to the Airport Perimeter Trail.

Essentially city gateways should have very strong active transportation routes to downtown.

## Chadburn Lake Park, downtown's Regional Park

*Great walking with spectacular views over the Yukon River valley. Areas: Hospital-Long Lake, Magnusson, upper Grey Mountain, upper Riverdale, Hidden Lakes, Chadburn Lakes.*

*Most downtown residents accessing the park use the Robert Campbell Bridge. Many drive and park in hospital or Dept of Ed parking lots, at Long Lake, or spots on Grey Mountain Road.*

Feature trails such as the Dream Trail will encourage locals to spend time in this nature-based gym and with a stay-another-day visitor concept, can make us a walking destination. Many trails are even usable in winter with fat tire bike trail packing making almost sidewalk conditions through the forest.

**Pedestrian bridge to hospital setting:** Similar in concept to the Rotary Centennial Bridge, a bridge will completely change downtown. It will be a strong incentive for people to walk over to Chadburn Lake Park and its many trails. It will signal that building denser can happen with a recreational focus on wilderness, on nature. Living downtown won't just be mostly recreational walking on streets, paved paths and sidewalks.

A pedestrian bridge near the VRC will draw residents through the Downtown Core. Downtown business will gain from increased vitality such as after-supper hiking, after-hiking suppers, live music. Hospital folk can patronize downtown, others can walk to the hospital for visits.

Right across the river from downtown, Whitehorse General Hospital is well placed to be a special setting. Starting at the front door, a set of trails would offer recreation and healing for staff and visitors, with scenic well-marked trails, varying from easy to hard, short to long, coffee-break and lunch-use lengths. Some would be accessible, of crushed gravel. A new connector trail right behind the hospital linking Long Lake

and Hospital ridges will benefit everyone using this area, allowing easy crossing without descending to the parking lot.

We talk of culture, of reconciliation. There is much good that could happen around this new pedestrian bridge. Having a strong First Nation focus both with the bridge, and particularly in a landscaped hospital setting, such as a healing forest.

By increasing use of Chadburn Lake Park, the bridge will offer opportunities for a variety of land-based jobs. On-going trail maintenance, interpretation, guiding, stories of glaciation, what it was like as ice sheets melted, the big lakes drained and the first people settled in the newly emerging lands.

## Downtown pedestrian issues

As a pedestrian there's a lot to understand, to deal with. A few groups are coming together to try to address winter sidewalk clearing. There are broad city-wide aspects to this problem but it is a very acute issue downtown.

Other aspects to downtown walking include:

- vehicles running lights, aggressive crosswalk behaviour, ...
- road crossings, crosswalks, traffic lights, sidewalks
- very slippery crosswalk paint used by the City
- berms that result from sidewalk or road clearing that block handicap parking, bus stops, sidewalk access at intersections
- crosswalks can be on one corner, sometimes both corners
- stretches of 2<sup>nd</sup> with no crosswalks make crossing the street feel illegal: Hawkins to Lowe and Black to Ogilvie
- walking if no sidewalk, or angle parking with no sidewalk
- steep sidewalk letdowns — sudden and icy in winter
- cracks, crevices and steep edges on paved trails
- snow thaws making large icy puddles where bad drainage
- street signs on sidewalks with signs at head height
- tendency that major trails be paved. Pavement is hard on feet for some walkers who end up walking on the grassy edge if it exists. Also pavement gets very icy at times. Perhaps it's a requirement under the gas tax rebate. Nonetheless, it means that we've not used crushed gravel paths. We should try a section and see if crushed gravel gives better results.

## How can some of this all happen?

For health, social, environmental and economic reasons, we must have both a denser downtown with walkable, residential neighbourhoods and a vibrant business core.

These are ideas that could happen. Who makes this happen? There's no walking group with a broad political mandate. Why? There isn't actually an easy walking group — we're shoppers, family out for a walk in the park, walking around the block to a friend's house, going for a hike, kids walking to school, walking to work, pushing a stroller, a walker, a wheelchair, walking a toddler, wandering around the neighbourhood, bird watching— the only constraint is our imagination.

Community trail work is presently only allowed by the Contagious Mountain Bike Group or the Klondike Snowmobile Association. There's no adopt-a-trail or adopt-an-area focus at this time. The City has lots of trails and few trail workers. Even getting small bits of trail work can seem insurmountable.

Ideas like a park-like environment with inviting connector trails and accessible trails and a healing forest at the hospital are an opportunity for the broader community, a service group, a sports group. A pedestrian bridge likewise will need funding beyond the City's ability. A Riverdale walkable

corridor could be sponsored by the Riverdale Community Association. A museum could sponsor Hepburn Tramway repairs. A senior's group could help a school create a trail. The list is long.

Some walking things are the responsibility of Parks and Recreation, others are Engineering. Sports and Recreation is a common part of apportioning City monies. Since walking is not a sport there's not really support there for walking needs. And within recreation, a large part of budgets goes to facilities such as the Canada Games Center, arenas, and playgrounds and parks. Paving trails also consumes a large amount of possible walking monies. Considering the large number of trails and trail users, the community at empowering walking but also how to facilitate better funding initiatives, better technical support for trails.

**Trail Planning:** In consultation with neighbourhoods through Trail Task Forces, the City developed Official Trail Maps for Yukon River South, Yukon River East, Porter Creek/Takhini/Whistle Bend/Range Point, Crestview, Yukon River North and Above-the-airport areas. Downtown wasn't an active member of any of their stakeholder committees, so wasn't able to offer a downtown perspective on its recreational walking needs. Possibly we need a downtown Trail Task Force with scope of responsibility that covers many of the areas I reference in this study, but at greater detail.

## Reading list

I've looked at many areas of town to see how walking could be better. Here's a selection:

- <http://www.whitehorsecwalks.com/docs/2018/YukonWalkingStrategyJune2018.pdf>
- <http://www.whitehorsecwalks.com/docs/2019/ShovelReadyTrailIdeas.pdf>
- <http://whitehorsecwalks.com/docs/2019/downtownObservationsFromAWalker.pdf>
- <http://www.whitehorsecwalks.com/walkingIdeas/spookCreekLowerEscarpmentTrail.html>
- <http://www.whitehorsecwalks.com/walkingIdeas/bridgeAndHospitalTrails.html>
- <http://www.whitehorsecwalks.com/walkingIdeas/DowntownMarwellWalking.html>
- <http://www.whitehorsecwalks.com/walkingIdeas/yukonRiverCorridorTrail.html>
- <http://www.whitehorsecwalks.com/loops/YukonRiverWest,SouthEnd.pdf>
- <http://www.whitehorsecwalks.com/walkingIdeas/5LoopTrails.html>
- <http://www.whitehorsecwalks.com/walkingIdeas/mountainViewObservations.html>
- <http://www.whitehorsecwalks.com/walkingIdeas/trailsYukonRiverEast.html>
- <http://whitehorsecwalks.com/docs/2017/TheHepburnTramway.pdf>
- <http://www.whitehorsecwalks.com/loops/LoopWalkingTrailsVRC.html>
- <http://www.whitehorsecwalks.com/docs/2022/whitehorsecwalks2transportationPlan,update.pdf>
- <http://www.whitehorsecwalks.com/docs/2022/bridgestoryv9.pdf>
- <http://www.whitehorsecwalks.com/docs/2022/DowntownSidewalksMap.pdf>
- <https://www.strongtowns.org/stmedia>