

Proposal for a Pedestrian Precinct in Burlington, Ontario

ITAC Working Group

Proposal submitted for September 27th, 2021 ITAC meeting

Background

While some may brush it off as a modern fad, pedestrianization of urban City corridors is far from a new concept. The technique was reportedly first used in Essen, Germany in 1929, and has continued to grow in popularity over the last century. Not just wildly popular in Europe, these Pedestrian Precincts (PP) have made their way to North America as well. In Canada alone, you can find them across the country from Halifax, to Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Regina, Calgary, and Vancouver.

The concept of a pedestrian precinct (PP) is rather simple. You take a corridor with heightened pedestrian foot traffic, close it off to vehicles, and improve the public realm through streetscaping and new furnishings.

The result of a PP is people no longer being limited to narrow slivers of concrete on either side of the road, but rather, allowing them to relax and socialize on benches and other furnishings, stop by local stores and shops, and eat at widened outdoor patios, without the concern of vehicle traffic. Most importantly, the benefits of PPs are also quantitative.

It has been reported that PPs increase foot traffic by 18-69% throughout the corridor, which in turn can increase shopping turnover by 16-40% (Wenzl, 2017). With such a sharp increase in foot traffic, it is no wonder that the City of Burlington (City) has shown a keen interest in implementing a PP of their own.

Transforming a downtown street into a PP aligns very closely with the City's strategic plan, as it ensures that Burlington becomes:

- A City that Grows, allowing people to live and work within the same walkable neighborhood, creating a culturally active downtown, and providing a public space where people can genuinely live, work, and gather as they please.
- A City that Moves, with a focus on walkable neighborhoods that prioritize pedestrians, transit, and cyclists while reducing people's reliance on automobiles.
- A Healthy and Greener City with a large urban public space where people can exercise, relax, and access a variety of parks and shops. A permanent PP also encourages enhanced landscaping features throughout the corridor that could see more trees and shrubbery planted in place of asphalted roadways; and
- An Engaging City that listens to its residents and creates public spaces that the City can truly be proud of.

While helping the City fulfill its strategic plan, a downtown PP has a host of additional benefits that include increased tourism, a safer and more active downtown core, noise reduction, cleaner air and encouraging active transportation and transit use over automobile reliance.

Naturally, with all the benefits of a PP, Burlington City Council had brought up the idea of creating a Brant Street PP in May 18, 2021, which resulted in some very lively discussions and excitement. As a result of this meeting, City Council approved staff direction to:

"...explore options to increase the ability for physical distancing and safe passage in response to COVID-19 for the area of Brant Street (Caroline Street to Lakeshore Road) for Saturdays and Sundays, from July 3 - September 5, 2021..."

This direction resulted in report [TS-08-21](#), which made recommendations to maintain the status quo and to not transform any corridors into a PP at this time. While this recommendation was ultimately chosen as an interim solution by Council, several members expressed a strong interest in exploring this further, positioning it as a potential long-term investment into the City's downtown.

The Burlington Integrated Transportation Advisory Committee (ITAC) was inspired by these events and created a PP working group focused on assessing the options available for creating a PP either along Brant Street, or another downtown street that would benefit from this transformation.

As a result, this Report has been prepared by the ITAC PP working group and looks into the history of PPs around the world, qualifications of a PP, its benefits and drawbacks, why it makes sense for all City residents, proposed locations, and a final recommendation.

History of Pedestrian Streets

Pre-industrialization, and during the early days of the automobile, cars and people were able to share the streets due to lower speeds and a common belief that the street belonged to the community as a public asset. However, over time, pedestrians were moved to the sidewalk, cars were given the right of way in our city streets, and these changes eventually evolved into what we see today.

In 1929, the town of Essen Germany recognized an increase in pedestrian activity and reacted to this by pedestrianizing Limbecker Street. Post World War Two, other European cities began pedestrianizing their streets as well, however this was done on an ad-hoc basis; applying specific solutions for specific areas instead of broadly applying a standard. Of these streets, includes Stroget Street in Copenhagen, the world's longest, and most well-known pedestrian street.



Figure 1: (Left) Stroget Street in 1935, pre-pedestrianization [photo from [copenhagenet.dk](#)]; (Right) Present-day Stroget Street post-pedestrianization [photo by [Tony Webster on Flickr](#)]

In October of 1962, a two year pilot project began on Stroget Street to pedestrianize the area to improve the flow of people as the sidewalks were becoming too crowded. This came with fears

that a lack of motor vehicle traffic and parking spaces would translate to a decrease in business. However, Stroget Street has become the busiest shopping street in the city and a model for cities across the globe. This model was replicated throughout the city, starting with pedestrian priority, followed by parking space removal, and finally removal of private vehicle traffic altogether. It took until 1980 for the city to make these streets into public recreation squares with seating, events space, etc., and in the 2000s sports and recreational infrastructure were added.

Seeing the success of PP in Europe, North America took notice and began working toward creating their own. However, the journey to successful pedestrian precincts in North America were not without their faults. In the 1960s and 1970s, the United States began converting main streets into pedestrian malls as part of the federal Urban Renewal campaign. Few of these remain though, with nearly 70% having been removed. The reason for their downfall is thought to be due to a number of factors, including:

- No pre-existing pedestrian traffic
- Poor maintenance
- Low entertainment / little management

Of those spaces that were successful and remained with further enhancements, some of the following was noted:

- Existing high pedestrian volumes
- Close proximity to post-secondary campuses
- Close proximity to beaches and tourist attractions
- Management by local government or the local BIA
- Frequent events/activities (6-10 per month) of varying sizes



Figure 2: Sparks Street/Rue Sparks in Ottawa, Ontario

In 1967, Ottawa looked to Sparks Street, a former main street in Ottawa, home to various historical figures and a commercial destination to become their first PP. Initially only pedestrianized in the summer, the city converted it into a permanent pedestrian precinct thereby establishing it as Canada's first outdoor pedestrian mall post-industrialization. More recently, areas with significant

pedestrian traffic such as Time Square have been converted into pedestrian precincts, and the City of Toronto has recently announced it will pedestrianize portions of Yonge Street and Dundas Square. As PP evolve, developers and cities are now looking towards converting entire neighbourhoods, such as the *Culdesac Tempe* in Tempe, Arizona into a pedestrian-first mindset featuring plazas and promenades free of private vehicle traffic.

Qualifications of a Pedestrianization-ready Street

By reviewing and analyzing both successful and unsuccessful pedestrian-only streets around the world, the following qualifications have been identified as highly important to ensure that a PP is successful for both businesses, and residents alike:

- Mixed use retail/recreation/anchor destination
- Access to various forms of transportation, including parking nearby
- Visually appealing buildings
- Population density
- Higher than average foot traffic
- Historically proven to be a successful pedestrian-only corridor

We will return to the above qualifications later in the document with a specific lens towards the city of Burlington and how specific areas meet the qualifications listed above.

Benefits and Drawbacks

Before making a decision such as converting a vehicle street into a PP, it is important to review the benefits and drawbacks of such a decision as it has the potential to impact thousands of residents. The following list is a comprehensive, however not exhaustive, list of both the benefits and drawbacks that the city will experience with pedestrianizing a street.

Benefits:

- Social interaction among residents increases
- Gives people a sense of belonging according to [Project for Public Spaces](#)
- Relaxing space for residents to get to know one another
- Creates emphasis on healthy lifestyles
- People spend more money while on foot than when driving¹
- Increased awareness of downtown businesses that residents may miss while driving
- Reduced cost of road infrastructure maintenance
- Reduced air pollution and other environmental implications of less cars travelling around the downtown
- Increase likelihood of residents choosing to take transit downtown
 - Promotes a mode shift from the car to transit/active transportation
 - Leads to less traffic on surrounding streets and potentially less motor vehicle accidents
- Tourism
- Possibly increased night time presence; longer hours of residents spending money on local business
- Noise reduction due to decreased vehicle engines and tire noise

Below are the drawbacks that we have researched related to PP, however we have included some commentary on ways to mitigate or completely avoid these potential negatives.

Drawbacks:

- Farther parking spots for those who have mobility issues
 - By ensuring that the street closed had minimal parking spots lost, those with mobility challenges shouldn't have to look too far for alternate parking options. Additionally, the City can look to reassess nearby parking spots and look to add in increased mobility specific parking spots
- Less parking spaces for those who travel by vehicle
 - Choosing a street where the number of parking spaces lost will be minimal and ensuring signage to City parking lots will ensure there is sufficient parking
- Possible increased night time presence, littering
 - Noise or overall increased foot traffic at night may pose a problem, however the majority of stores close between 10pm-12am on weekends and should cause minimal noise increases. Additionally, loud cars and motorcycles are not bound to store closures and the noise pollution from these vehicles currently can happen at any time in the night. In terms of littering, we believe the downtown area in Burlington could use more garbage cans so concerns over littering can be mitigated with increasing the number of garbage cans.
- Financial costs to ensure safety of those in pedestrianized area
 - Enforcement and signage needed so that vehicles understand the closure times, as well as pedestrians using the PP.
- Might need increased police presence/enforcement
 - As the pedestrians get used to the pedestrian experience happening regularly hopefully there will be less need for enforcement
- Driver frustration due to route changes
 - Frustration should be decreased by the use of good signage and consistent closures (ie always on the same days/times so drivers become used to the detour)
- Missing infrastructure (ie benches, bike racks)
 - We believe that overall the city should be increasing the number of benches on trails and pedestrian areas in general. Additionally, this might be a good opportunity to promote the sale of memorial benches thereby reducing infrastructure costs. Also, the reduction of road infrastructure maintenance due to decreased car usage may mitigate additional costs required during closures.

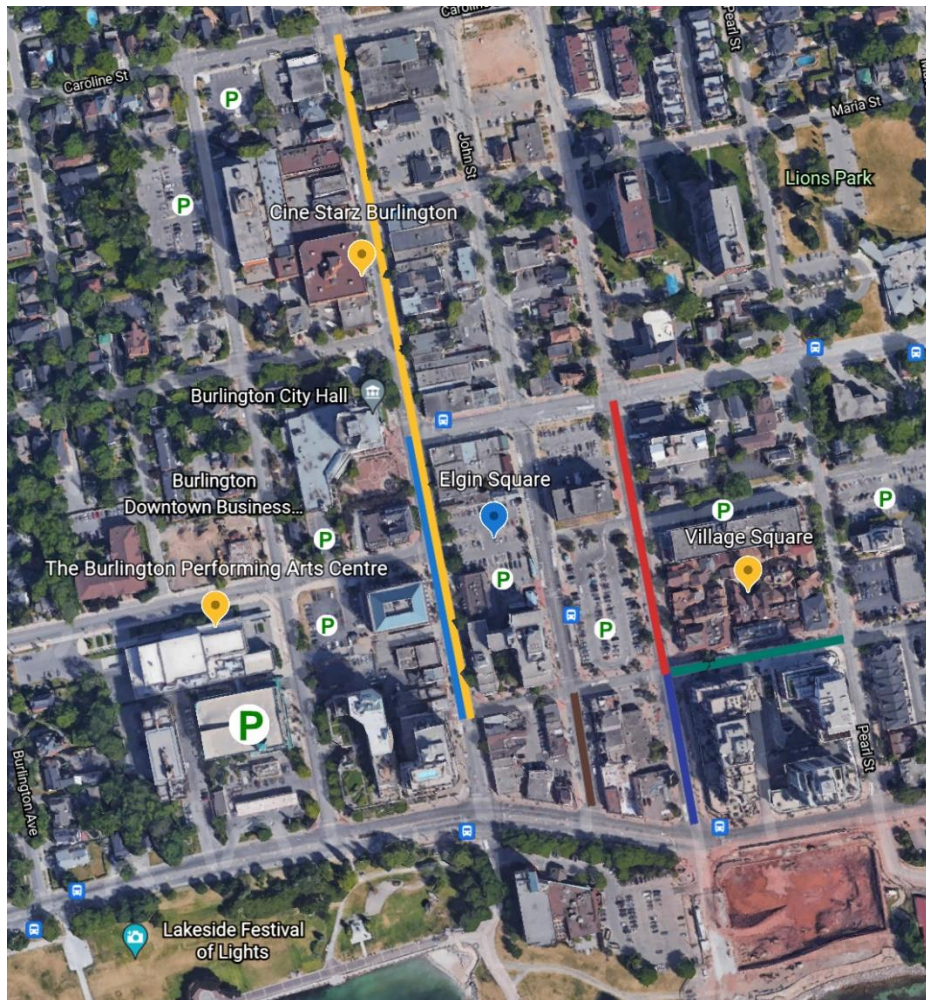
With the multitude of successful pedestrian streets around the globe, the local benefits for residents, and the solutions to the potential drawbacks, it is easy to see that a pedestrian street can be highly beneficial for both residents and local businesses alike. Below we will take you through Burlington specific examples, including all locations that were assessed during the process.

Why a PP Makes Sense for the City of Burlington

One of the most apparent takeaways from the Covid-19 pandemic has been the importance of public space in cities around the world, including our very own. Downtown is a destination for many across the GTA, well known for our Spencer Smith waterfront park and the beachway. This increase in tourism caused by a strong desire for citizens to "buy local" has increased pedestrian traffic in ways that make certain streets overcrowded and unpleasant to stroll down. This signals

an opportunity for the city to embrace the direction of moving from a car-oriented tourism economy to a more healthy and sustainable one. A pedestrian street brings a new experience -- thought to only be had in European cities -- to visitors and the residents of Burlington alike. It provides a common space for friends and families to meet, and creates a sense of community via chance encounters. The space can invoke a sense of civic pride and awareness in Burlington by those who don't normally frequent downtown or spend most of their time out of the city. While researching pedestrian streets around the world, we took a close look at a few potential streets in the downtown core that could make a viable PP. Below is a map of the potential streets that were reviewed during this process.

Identified streets in Burlington



Using the aforementioned qualifications, the working group looked to identify potential corridors for pedestrianization including variations of the original proposal of Brant from Caroline to Lakeshore. In addition to Brant Street, four separate street were examined for a pedestrian precinct, as noted in the map above. In addition to identifying the potential streets, we have noted the public parking lots within the downtown core to provide a better understanding of route changes and availability of parking if one of these streets were to be closed to vehicles. Below is a list of streets that were reviewed by the working group but were ultimately decided against:

1. John St, South of Pine *noted in brown on the map above*
2. Elizabeth St, South of Pine *noted in violet on the map above*
3. Elizabeth St, Between Pine St and James St *noted in red on the map above*
4. Pine St, Between Elizabeth St and Pearl St *noted in green on the map above*

Before we discuss the four additional options and why they did not prove to be viable, we wanted to bring attention to one change that our working group had identified that differed from the original proposal brought forward to council. Rather than Brant Street being closed to Lakeshore, we reviewed the closure only to Pine Street as there is a parking garage that is accessed at this intersection that would require accessibility throughout the day, with no alternative street entrances.

Lower John Street



Figure 3: John St, South of Pine looking south

The following issues were noted which resulted in the elimination of lower John St:

1. Fewer Shops
2. Fronts a retirement residence which encompasses a large portion of the block
3. Only access to a private parking lot

Lower Elizabeth Street



Figure 4: Intersection of Elizabeth and Pine St, looking south to Lakeshore

The following issues were noted which resulted in the elimination of lower Elizabeth St:

1. Fronts a condo residence (The Baxter)
2. Private parking access
3. Few compatible land-uses along the corridor

Upper Elizabeth Street



Figure 5: Intersection of Elizabeth and Pine St, looking north to James St

The following issues were noted which resulted in the elimination of upper Elizabeth St:

1. Large parking lot on West Side, thereby lacking the conditions to create a street wall
2. Access to parking lots

Pine Street



Figure 6: Intersection of Elizabeth and Pine St, looking east to Pearl Street

The following issues were noted which resulted in the elimination of upper Pine St:

1. Lack of compatible land-use on the south side
2. Access to private parking

Brant Street



Figure 7: Brant Street looking south

Two variations of Brant street are proposed: Caroline to Pine Street, and James Street to Pine Street, with the original proposal being preferred. Below we outline how Brant Street meets the defined qualifications for a pedestrian precinct based on the qualifications listed at the beginning of this report:

- *Mixed use retail/recreation/anchor destination:* Brant Street has a wide array of retail and dining experiences for residents. Retail ranges from home decor to clothing. Dining options exist for the global palette; including Indian, Vietnamese, Chinese, Mexican and American options, to name a few. Additionally, with Spencer Smith Park in such close proximity, visitors have the opportunity to experience the waterfront and a beautiful greenspace. The above are all examples of not only mixed use space, but also provides activities for diverse groups across all ages, genders and ethnic groups. Furthermore, with the addition of the new luxury hotel at the waterfront, there is a draw for both residents and tourists alike to spend time in downtown Burlington
- *Access to various forms of transportation:* Downtown Burlington is easily accessible by car, with 9 Green P parking lots allowing easy access to the PP. Additionally, the PP can be accessed by the John Street bus terminal, and is a short distance from the Maple Trail, Waterfront Trail, and Centennial Bike path, allowing safe access for riders, bikers and rollers.



Figure 8: Queens Hotel (now The Queens Head restaurant) in downtown Burlington (credits to [Burlington Historical Society](#))

- *Visually appealing buildings:* Downtown Burlington is well known for its unique, heritage buildings. For example, the Queens Head pub was built in 1860⁴ as a hotel and is still in operation today. Many residents of Burlington are protective of the history of downtown and love the unique buildings that line the street and closing the street to pedestrians allows for a greater ability to appreciate our history.
- *Population density:* Downtown Burlington is experiencing major growth with the approval of high-density buildings along Brant Street, or within close proximity. Additionally, according to Stats Canada, Ontario is projected to see population growth above the

national average⁵. Looking to the 2016 Census, Burlington had a population growth of 4.3%, with Ontario seeing a population growth of 4.6% overall⁶. Thus, Burlington is on pace with the entire province in terms of population growth and will likely continue to see a healthy increase to population, and therefore residents who will be accessing the PP.

- *Higher than average foot traffic:* It is no secret that Burlington is a car-reliant city, as are most suburban cities. However, stroll down Brant Street on a weekend in the summer and you will see more pedestrians than almost anywhere else in town. Brant Street is *the* destination for many residents in the summer to shop, eat and relax. Looking into the near future of our city, specifically at the arrival of a Brock University campus within busing/cycling distance, it is expected for this traffic to increase in the future.
- *Historically proven to be a successful pedestrian corridor:* Although Brant Street has never been closed to foot traffic on a regular weekend, it does get closed down on many occasions in the summer for events such as the Car Show and the Sound of Music Festival. The popularity of both of these events, as well as others that require the closure of Brant Street are good examples of what Brant Street could look like if it were to become a PP.

Secondary Recommendation

If it is not possible to pedestrianize Brant Street from Caroline to Pine Street, ITAC is recommending creation of a reduced pedestrian precinct between James Street and Pine Street for the following reasons:

1. This area is where a large amount of pedestrian traffic concentrates
2. Create a pedestrian plaza that would connect Civic Square and Elgin Square
3. Avoids need to reroute buses

The committee believes, though, that improvements made to the whole corridor would better increase foot traffic, and encourage visitors to explore the downtown.

Implementation Plan Options and Overall Costs

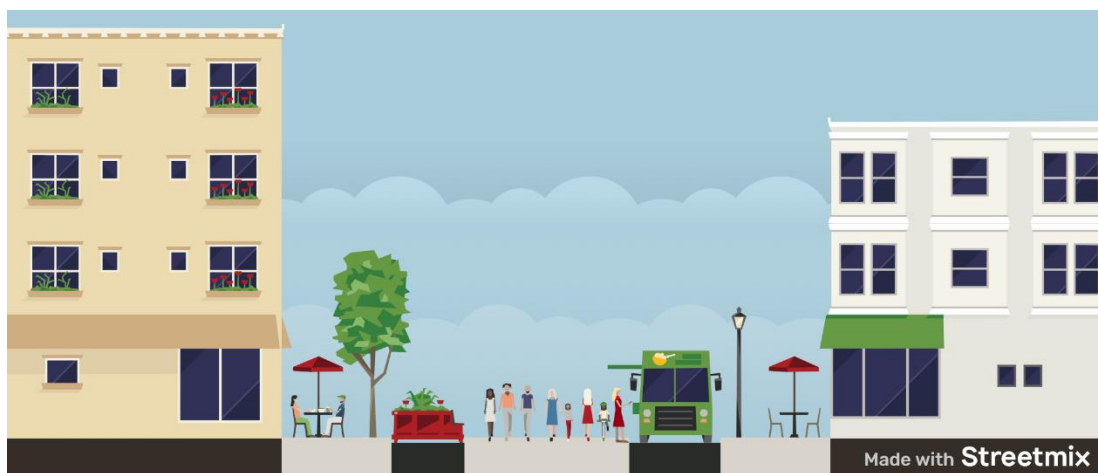


Figure 9: Cross section of a potential Pedestrian Precinct on Brant St.

To create a PP, the City must first decide on which street should receive this treatment. The benefits of a PP and various options from this Report could be presented to Council, with “Get Involved Burlington” helping poll the public and businesses for which street they prefer as a PP. Our suggestion as the tentative start of this PP is June 21 2022, as it is the first day of summer and within days of the school year completing, and residents are excited to get outside and spend time outdoors with family. Note, this date is flexible through the discretion of council and can also be coordinated through “Get Involved Burlington.”

Once the street is chosen, there are two items that remain in the implementation plan that must be decided:

1. PP Type

- Option A (Partial PP): Create partial PP by closing parking lanes, effectively widening the sidewalks while maintaining through-traffic for vehicles;
- Option B (Full PP): Create a full PP by fully closing the corridor to vehicular traffic; and
- Option C (Status Quo): Maintaining Status Quo and don't create any form of PP.

2. PP Duration

- Option A (Permanent): Permanently shut off the selected street to all traffic;
- Option B (Seasonal): Seasonally shut off the selected street to all traffic during the summer (June 21, 2022 (first day of summer) to September Labour Day weekend.
- Option C (Weekend Seasonal): Seasonally shut off the selected street to all traffic on Saturdays and Sundays during the summer (June 21, 2022 (first day of summer) to Labour Day weekend.

In the City of Burlington's Report [TS-08-21](#), Staff provided cost estimates to implement a Seasonal Weekend closure (64 calendar days from July 3 to September 5, 2021) along 500m of Brant Street from Lakeshore Road to Caroline Street. Using this data, the following cost estimates of PP implementation can be extrapolated assuming a linear relationship between cost and length of PP:

Table A1 - Cost per PP Type and Duration

PP Duration	PP Type Cost (Per 100m)		
	Partial PP	Full PP	Status Quo
Permanent	\$156,334.06	\$132,380.94	\$5,589.06
Seasonal	\$32,551.75	\$23,212.00	\$1,163.75
Weekend Seasonal	\$9,300.50	\$7,875.50	\$332.50

Considering that the City's annual budget was \$353.4M in 2020, this represents the following increase in the overall budget:

Table A2 - Required City Budget Percentage Increase per PP Type and Duration

PP Duration	PP Type Required Budget Increase (Per 100m)		
	Partial PP	Full PP	Status Quo
Permanent	0.044%	0.037%	N/A <i>Already included in annual budget</i>
Seasonal	0.009%	0.008%	
Weekend Seasonal	0.003%	0.002%	

To provide some further context, assuming that 70% of Burlington's 183,000 population are taxpayers, this represents the following increase in annual taxes from each taxpayer in the City:

Table A3 - Annual Tax Increase per Taxpayer per PP Type and Duration

PP Duration	PP Type Annual Tax Increase (Per 100m, Per Taxpayer)		
	Partial PP	Full PP	Status Quo
Permanent	\$1.22	\$1.03	N/A <i>Already included in annual budget</i>
Seasonal	\$0.25	\$0.22	
Weekend Seasonal	\$0.07	\$0.06	

Recommendation

Weighing the economic, cultural, and environmental benefits of instituting a PP versus the cost to set up and maintain it, **ITAC recommends the creation of a full weekend seasonal PP Pilot Project on the select street in 2022.**

At a cost of only \$0.06 per year from each taxpayer, this option creates a full PP during the summer months when the downtown core becomes its busiest, generating increased foot traffic at local businesses, improving air quality, and creating a cultural oasis in the heart of the City for both residents and tourists to enjoy.

“The street is the river of life of the city, the place where we come together, the pathway to the center.”

—William H. Whyte

References

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 2. which was essentially translated to this article:
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