July 27, 2020

To: Municipalities and regional districts in the Vancouver Coastal Health region,

Re: Repurposing Public Space for Cycling and Walking in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

I am writing in my role as Deputy Chief Medical Health Officer with Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) to encourage local governments to repurpose public space for walking and cycling in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and to support the expansion of initiatives already underway. Doing so will help to ensure that people can travel, be physically active and meet essential needs safely, and will support our collective efforts to limit the spread of COVID-19 in our communities.

Data and local observation show an increase in pedestrian and cycling volumes across VCH during the pandemic. To sustain this mode shift in the long term and to reap the host of population health benefits this might bring, local government action to enhance and increase safe pedestrian and cycling infrastructure is needed now and into the future. As we move into summer, we will continue to see more pedestrians and cyclists on our streets. Physical distancing can become challenging when sidewalks and cycling paths are congested. For this reason, local governments in British Columbia and around the world have implemented measures to create more space for pedestrians and cyclists.

While this has been a promising start, we recommend additional repurposing of public space in our communities for the following reasons:

- **Maintaining low outdoor disease transmission**: The Provincial Health Officer has emphasized that COVID-19 transmission risk associated with outdoor activity is extremely low as long as physical distancing is maintained\(^1\). Therefore, creating space for people to get outside and move safely is paramount to limiting the spread of the virus in our communities and supporting quality of life when other restrictions are in place.

- **Physical activity and mental health promotion**: When transportation networks are designed to make active transportation safe, people of all ages and abilities are encouraged to choose walking and cycling as modes of travel\(^2\). This is particularly important during times when people are faced with additional pressures, work and financial strain, as well as disruptions in normal routines that may contribute to heightened anxiety and other mental health concerns that may persist post pandemic. Creating space for health provides opportunities for people to choose healthier transportation options that are associated with better physical and mental wellbeing and greater opportunities for social connectedness, particularly for those most vulnerable in society who have the most to gain from public investment in walkability. Healthy behaviours fostered now could persist beyond the pandemic and have the potential to improve population health outcomes in the longer term.

- **Injury prevention**: Decreasing our reliance on private vehicles and creating transportation networks that are conducive to walking and cycling, makes it safer for everyone. In the current pandemic context, people using sidewalks for transportation may be required to step into traffic lanes when approaching oncoming pedestrians or outdoor queues to maintain physical distancing, creating the possibility of injury. While creating adequate space now will allow for recommended physical distancing to be done safely, safe transportation networks that prioritize pedestrians and cyclists will continue to reduce the risk of vulnerable road user injuries beyond the pandemic.
● **Air quality and climate change:** Reducing the burning of fossil fuels for transport will reduce the rate and severity of the impact of climate change. Creating opportunities for active modes of travel by creating more space for walking and cycling, and therefore less space for vehicular traffic, will reduce our emissions footprint and create more pleasant environments for living, working, travelling and playing.

We encourage you to make use of the [COVID-19 Street Rebalancing Guide](https://www.gov.bc.ca/Activetransportationdesignguide) developed by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and Urban Systems. This guide provides guidance to municipalities on how to temporarily redesign streets to ensure physical and mental health, safety and wellbeing, and how to transition these projects from temporary to permanent. Our VCH staff includes experts in design interventions to support health, and we are pleased to support local governments in these goals.

VCH is committed to working with local governments to create and enhance health-promoting environments for people to travel safely while following physical distancing guidelines. We believe that repurposing public space for cycling and walking exemplifies these common objectives, and we encourage the expansion of these initiatives.

Sincerely,

Mark Lysyshyn MD MPH FRCPC
Deputy Chief Medical Health Officer
Vancouver Coastal Health

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