

Can a major thoroughfare accommodate cars *and* bikes?

The City is holding a public consultation about the Williamsville bike lanes on October 26, 6-8pm, at St. Lukes Church, 236 Nelson St.

Williamsville Transportation Study Proposes Removal of Princess Street Bike Lanes to a complex problem

STORY BY JANE KIRBY

Four years after the City of Kingston officially declared a “climate emergency,” a City transportation study is proposing the removal of bike lanes along Princess Street. The proposal is part of the Williamsville Transportation Study (WTS), which opened its public engagement process last spring. The plan proposes expanded sidewalks with trees and benches and queue-jump lanes for transit that would allow buses to jump ahead of vehicles at intersections. These would exist alongside a bi-directional roadway for the section of Princess Street running from Division Street to Bath Road.

The WTS also suggests removing existing bike lanes. They are identified as a cycling “spine” route in the City’s Active Transportation Master Plan (ATMP), with sections of Princess Street further west identified as “proposed spine routes.” These spine routes are intended to be the major routes connecting neighbourhoods across the city, encouraging people to commute across the city by bicycle rather than car.

The WTS proposed that Concession Streets and Brock and Johnson streets, along with neighbourhood bike routes, could be viable alternatives to Princess Street for cyclists. However, no road runs parallel to Princess Street, and any of the proposed options would present a significant detour for cyclists. Brock and Johnson have existing cycling lanes and are already considered part of the spine network. Concession Street currently lacks a bike lane but was identified as a “proposed spine route” under the ATMP — in other words, bike lanes on Concession were considered necessary *in addition* to the Princess Street bike lanes, not as an alternative to them.

Given the City’s stated commitments to tackling climate change and promoting active transportation, the decision to reduce cycling infrastructure leading to the city’s downtown core is confusing, at best.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

The WTS is an outgrowth of the Williamsville Main Street Study, which was originally approved by City Council in 2012 to guide future development along Princess Street. On the direction of the City’s planning department, the Main Street Study did not originally consider cycling infrastructure, but advocacy from area residents and the Kingston Coalition for Active Transportation (KCAT) resulted in an additional study, one that recommended bike lanes. Despite opposition from those concerned about a reduction in parking spaces, the recommendation to implement bike lanes on Princess Street was adopted by council in 2013.

The resulting painted bike lanes snake around parking spots, in what KCAT president Roger Healey describes as a “compromise between on-street parking and bike lanes” and a “drunken sailor” approach. Though less than ideal, the lanes are a necessary improvement, giving cyclists a measure of safety on a busy roadway that forms a necessary link leading to downtown.

However, in 2020 the City introduced an update to the Williamsville Main Street Study. According to Healey, the “updates” might be better described as “rewrites,” introduced at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when opportunities for meaningful public engagement were limited.

Ian Semple, Director of Transport and Transit at the City of Kingston, says that the revisions to the plan were necessary in light of the way the neighbourhood had developed since 2012. Specifically, despite guidelines for development in the original plan that would allow for an expanded pedestrian realm and transit improvements, City Council allowed many major developments — such as Jay Patry’s Foundry building — to go forward without respecting specified setbacks.

The result is a limited public right-of-way space to be shared among pedestrians, cyclists, transit users and drivers, and a difficult situation for Semple’s department. As such, the revised study suggested that the long-term design of Princess Street may need to consider the removal of turning lanes for vehicles, the reduction or removal of parking spaces, and limiting “dedicated buffered cycling lanes along the corridor.”

WHAT WAS CONSIDERED

The Williamsville Transportation Study was built on these directives. Semple points to five scenarios, which included considering the implementation of bi-directional and one-way bike lanes, that were the basis of the study’s analysis. The scenarios suggest that no bike lanes are possible with expanded space for pedestrians and the addition of transit queue-jump lanes, even if parking spaces were removed.

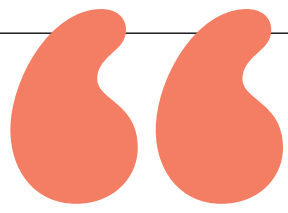
This conclusion, while presented convincingly, does not seem to have been particularly nuanced or imaginative, possibly because the study *started* from the foregone conclusion that bike lanes could be sacrificed. No consideration, for example, seems to have been given to whether narrower parts of the street could have narrower sidewalks or fewer queue-jump lanes, so that a bike lane could be kept along the entirety of the street. And although Semple suggested that vehicle turning lanes would also be removed to make space for transit queue jumps, a closer look at the plans indicate that turning lanes would also be added at some intersections. A new left-turn lane at Nelson Street, for example, would be added to compensate for the removal of a turning lane at Alfred Street.

We know sidewalks and bike lanes can coexist even on the narrowest sections of Princess Street, as they do already. Are there ways to beautify the sidewalk and improve the pedestrian experience that will still keep cyclists safe? Would the removal of one transit-queue jump lane have a significant impact on transit travel times?

The Williamsville Transportation Study suggests that “confident cyclists” may continue to use Princess Street, a statement that reads as “use at your own risk.” The sentiment is an affront to cyclists who bike without dedicated lanes not because they are confident or feel safe, but because they have no other option.

Semple suggests that even without bike lanes on Princess Street, the suggested improvements may leave cyclists feeling safer than they do currently. Although these items were not in the documents presented in the spring, Semple says the proposed plan includes details such as reduced speeds for motorists and bike boxes at intersections.

These features are definite improvements. However, the plan also suggests narrowing the roadway to 3.3 metres, limiting cyclists space to be in traffic safely.



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Referring to the road narrowing and the removal of parking spaces, Semple is quick to point out that, “It is not as if we are giving more space to cars. We are definitely removing the space available to vehicles.” But there seem to be limits to how much space for vehicles the City will recommend removing.

WHAT’S THE ALTERNATIVE?

Healey proposes that one option for the Williamsville stretch of Princess Street would be to make it one-way for vehicles, continuous with the downtown section, allowing more space for improvements that would benefit cyclists, pedestrians, and transit users.

Perhaps cars could even be eliminated altogether from that stretch of Princess Street. The proposal sounds radical. However, consider that the City of Montreal blocks major streets — one in every neighbourhood — to traffic during the summer, and urban life there appears to be thriving.

Semple says that shifting Princess Street to a one-way street, or one reserved for active and public transportation only, would be a major change that would have had to have been considered earlier in the process. He also says that eliminating vehicles on Princess Street would result in increased traffic on Concession Street and Brock and Johnson streets, which would be a concern for the surrounding neighbourhoods.

(Traffic north and south of Princess Street is a concern of the Williamsville Community Association, especially given the number of students travelling to Queen’s and to neighbourhood schools; however, they are not satisfied with the City’s current proposal either).

According to Semple, the study anticipated increases in future vehicle traffic, which is why transit queue-jump lanes are being recommended despite transit currently flowing smoothly through this stretch of Princess Street.

Healey sees it differently, arguing that reduced infrastructure for vehicles will result in less vehicle traffic overall, as people will choose different modes of transportation or reduce their number of trips. We need to significantly reduce the number of vehicle trips to address climate change.

A study in 2021 of 106 European cities found that cycling increased up to forty-eight per cent more in cities where cycling infrastructure was added versus those where infrastructure was not added.¹

What will happen to Kingston if we take cycling infrastructure away?

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/01/climate/bikes-climate-change.html>



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