

Authors: Zarah Monfaredi, Meghan Winters, Remington Latanville, Kevin Manaugh, Paul Hess, Raktim Mitra

No sooner said than done: exploring the lessons learned about equity considerations and public engagement processes in pandemic-time active transportation planning in Vancouver, Toronto, and Montréal

There has been much speculation about how COVID-19 will impact life in cities and, in particular, urban mobility. While we are two years on from the initial pandemic, most research has focused on immediate responses. Our work looks to the long-term, to determine how lessons learned about equity and public engagement during the pandemic-time street reallocation implementation will impact future active transportation planning in the metropolitan areas of Vancouver, Toronto, and Montréal.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with city staff who were involved in active transportation decision-making during the pandemic (Vancouver, n=5; Toronto, n=10; Montréal, n=5). We asked questions with a specific focus on COVID-19 street reallocations, including new bike lanes, motor vehicle lane closures, and quiet streets. We conducted a framework analysis to identify common themes in how equity and public engagement procedures were operationalized by city staff in each metropolitan area and how pandemic-time decision making will influence future city planning.

Our findings suggest that the pandemic impacted equity and public engagement in active transportation planning in three main ways, by: (1) Refocusing the types of equity considered; (2) Disrupting conventional engagement processes; (3) Reinforcing pre-existing plans and professional expertise. Participants spoke to a changing policy landscape where traditional methods of assessing equity and conducting public engagement did not serve all population groups well. The pandemic urgency put a spotlight on the importance of communication with residents affected by infrastructure change, particularly where historic injustices perpetuate contemporary inequities. The pandemic also accelerated timelines of implementation, which impacted the information used to make decisions; some municipalities found pre-existing planning documents to be helpful and others relied on professional expertise. This research is supported by a SSHRC grant.

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