

# Toronto's car-first policies create a war on the people

A children's protest over the removal of neighbourhood stop signs showed me how unsafe Toronto is



Luke Duras, 3, protests the planned removal of stop sign on a residential Toronto street. "Toronto's rate of pedestrian fatalities was 1.6 per 100,000," writes Richard Florida. "That's worse than Chicago, Seattle, San Francisco, Boston, Washington, D.C., Portland, Pittsburgh, Cleveland and Buffalo." (RANA FLORIDA)

By Richard Florida  
Mon., Sept. 25, 2017

The other day, when I was driving home from a meeting in downtown Toronto, I came upon a group of kids near the corner where I live, waving signs and chanting “Stop Signs Save Kids Lives.”

To my eyes, it surely was the most adorable protest ever. But it’s also a big wake up call to what is Toronto’s greatest remaining flaw — how incredibly dangerous our city streets are for pedestrians.

What prompted the protest was the notice that a set of parking signs that were installed earlier this summer were being removed. The large majority of the neighbourhood was delighted when the signs went up. Cars had been zooming down that road at high speeds, endangering pedestrians and cyclists. The street — and for that matter, our entire neighbourhood — has no bike lanes either.

I have witnessed several near-collisions between bikes and cars at that corner. A cyclist was killed not too far away several years ago, at an intersection where a stop sign should have been — and later was — installed, alongside a ghost bike. Though I am an avid biker, I made a personal decision a year or so ago to stop cycling to my office at the University of Toronto; the risk just isn’t worth it.

The new stop signs were installed at the request of our neighbourhood association, which had organized a survey showing broad support for them — 68 pro versus four opposed. It commissioned a traffic study as well, which found that aggressive speeding was common. Our councillor agreed that signs were called for and the community council approved the request. By all accounts the signs did their job, reducing the average speed of traffic from a dangerous (and illegal) 48 km/h to a much safer 34 km/h.

But then a backlash occurred. A handful of neighbours complained that buses and cars made too much noise in front of their houses when they stopped and started. They applied pressure to the neighbourhood association, which caved and asked the city to remove the signs. Despite our pleas and protests, they will be taken down later this month. When it comes to the safety of our local streets, politics are being allowed to trump basic public safety.

The upside is the neighbourhood truly came together; and a meeting is being held between our neighbours, our councillor and experts from the city’s department of transportation. Hopefully, they will come up with a much-needed solution. All the neighbourhood is asking is that the stop signs be left up until that happens.

The late Rob Ford’s rallying cry of the “war on the car” mobilized the support of frustrated drivers across the city and region, who were legitimately tired of being stuck in its horrendous

traffic. But the reality is that Toronto's inability to cope with cars and their speed has unleashed a deadly "war on the people."

The statistics on this are terrifying. More people die in Toronto because they are hit by cars each year than because they are shot with guns. All told, nearly 2,000 pedestrians and another 1,000 cyclists were hit by cars in 2016 — one pedestrian is hit, on average, every four or five hours, and a cyclist every eight or nine hours; 43 of them died. Toronto's rate of pedestrian fatalities was 1.6 per 100,000. That's worse than Chicago, Seattle, San Francisco, Boston, Washington, D.C., Portland, Pittsburgh, Cleveland and Buffalo.

The ironic thing is that I was on my way home from a meeting with city, provincial, business, and community leaders about Toronto's bid for Amazon's second headquarters, which promises to bring some 50,000 new jobs and billions of dollars in investment to the winning city.

With our abundant talent, superb universities and colleges, vibrant clusters of finance, real estate, and tech, openness to immigrants, provincially financed schools and health-care, relative safety from violent crime, great green spaces, and world-class urban fabric, Toronto should be among the very strongest contenders for Amazon's new headquarters. But, frankly, I fear our dangerous streets will take us down a notch.

Toronto is a great city with many amazing things going for it. It's time we make our streets safer for our people, especially the elderly and children who are at the highest risk.

Now, even our kids are telling us so. We should listen to them.

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