

Report on Barriers to safe and accessible walking on Oak Bay Avenue, submitted to Mayor and Council by Tom and Jean Newton, members of Walk On, Victoria, the CRD's pedestrian advocacy group, September, 2022

Oak Bay residents who participated on the two walks we conducted on August 9th and 13th gave their accounts of safety concerns and barriers they encounter when walking on Oak Bay Avenue.

For brevity, we have summarized people's concerns under three headings:

- 1) Narrow Sidewalks
- 2) Broken and Slanted Pavement
- 3) Problem Curb Lips and Crosswalks

1. Narrow Sidewalks

- Before the temporary sidewalk extensions that were added due to the Covid Pandemic, most sidewalks on Oak Bay Avenue were too narrow. The people we spoke with like the wider, extended sidewalk space and want it to be made permanent, though most think the permanent version needs to be more attractive. Everyone would like the temporary sidewalks to be reconstructed at the same height as the existing sidewalk, thereby creating a wider new sidewalk.
- People using walkers or scooters and those pushing baby carriages are unable to move from existing sidewalks to the temporary extensions because they aren't able to get up and down the curbs. People would like to see temporary patios made permanent but at curb height, not at current street level. Two people who travel by wheelchair and scooter remarked they are unable to use the patios because of a step down at the curb. Everyone agreed the Penny Farthing Patio, with the planters, is an attractive addition that makes the street more vibrant, but it also creates sidewalk congestion. No one was sure how the congestion can be addressed other than to keep the sidewalk in the area as unobstructed as possible.
- Several people suggested that Starbucks needs a formal patio because unaware customers sometimes push their chairs back from the outdoor tables into the path of pedestrians who are trying to get by.
- Fear of falling is common among many older adults, especially those who have vision problems and/or mobility issues that require them to use canes, walkers, wheelchairs or scooters. Overgrown shrubs, utility poles, garbage cans, sandwich boards and crowded bus stops all block sidewalks at various points along Oak Bay Avenue and are identified as barriers to safe walking.

The following is a list of some of the worst "pinch" points identified:

- The garbage receptacle on the lower sidewalk outside Hughes
- The sandwich boards in the area near Fort Royal Pharmacy and Hide and Seek Coffee shop
- The exceedingly narrow space for anyone using a scooter or electric wheelchair on the ramp at Hampshire by Canada Trust. (Impossible turn at top of ramp)
- The uncomfortably narrow sidewalk on the south side of Oak Bay Avenue between Yale and Mitchell where it is nearly impossible for two people walking in opposite directions to pass without one of them walking out into the street
- The very narrow sidewalk outside the Oaks at the corner of Oak Bay Avenue and Monterey.
- The near impossibility to maneuver a scooter at the Elgin Street crosswalk to get onto the sidewalk on the south side of Oak Bay Avenue, and a similar problem for scooters turning on or off the south side of Oak Bay Avenue onto Yale.

2. Broken Pavement and Slanted Sidewalks

There are too many areas with broken pavement and slanted sidewalks to enumerate. Some of the worst are marked with orange paint, but many others aren't. Broken sidewalks and sidewalks raised by tree roots create a tripping hazard for people of all ages and are especially dangerous for frail, older adults. Slanted pavement can throw less agile pedestrians off balance, and frailer people are at risk of falling when pushing walkers on slanted pavement. One woman told us that the steep slant on Oak Bay Avenue on the west side of the driveway to Municipal Hall is difficult for her to get up when she has heavy bags of groceries in the basket on the front of her walker.

Some of the worst places for slanted pavement are:

- Both corners of the crosswalk at Elgin and Oak Bay Avenue. This location, near the Carlton, is where many older people walk and cross the street. Residents from Kiwanis Village, Elgin Gardens, Shannon Oaks and the Bee Street Apartments also walk along Elgin and must navigate this corner on their way to the Village.
- Slanted pavement at Oak Bay Avenue and Monterey is problematic at all but the northwest corner.
 - Slants at the corner of Yale Avenue
 - Slants by the driveway into the Municipal Hall parking lot off Oak Bay Avenue.

3. Curb lips and Crosswalks Tripping on the shallow lips that are common on older curb cuts is something many older adults, especially those with vision problems, have experienced. Some have fallen, others have barely caught themselves in a near-fall. Lips at curb cuts pose problems for people using walkers because it is necessary to angle the walker just the right way to avoid a jarring collision with the barely noticeable lip. A woman who uses a wheelchair for transportation explained that she needs to be going at exactly the right speed to safely and easily move over a curb lip, especially if it is on a slant. She has not tipped in her wheelchair but fears she might. Some people prefer to drive their scooters along the side of the road to avoid curb lips, but scooters on the road are at risk from drivers who may not see a person on a scooter, who is travelling faster, and is of lower height, than a person walking.

Crossing the street is a big concern for people with any kind of mobility challenge or vision disability. They fear not getting across the street in the time allotted, and they fear the impatience of motorists who drive past them at close proximity. Walking slowly may put them at risk. When curb cuts are poorly aligned at a crosswalk (mid-block or at a street corner), getting across a street safely becomes more problematic. This is the case on the south side corner of Monterey and Oak Bay Avenue.

The following is an incomplete list of problematic curb lips on Oak Bay Avenue between Foul Bay Road and Monterey. *For a good view of the problem, look at Apple Maps streetview of Oak Bay Avenue.*

Problem curb lips and/or unaligned crosswalks are at:

- The northeast and northwest corners of Monterey
- The crosswalk by CIBC
- The northwest side of Hampshire
- The southeast side of Hampshire
- The northeast and southeast crosswalk at Wilmot
- The southwest driveway entrance to Municipal Hall
- All curb lips and curb cuts at Yale
- All curb lips and crosswalk alignments at Elgin
- Curb lips and crosswalk alignments on the Oak Bay side of Foul Bay Road. (The Victoria side is newly constructed.)

Beyond Monterey

Although the walks we led were between Foul Bay and Monterey, several people told us about problems they experience when walking further along Oak Bay Avenue to the junction where the Avenue turns into Newport. Beyond the commercial area of Oak Bay Avenue, crosswalks are spaced further apart, and crossing the street becomes riskier. For those who want to walk down to the beach, there is no sidewalk at Beresford Place, and the path off Oak Bay Avenue leads to a staircase. The infrequency of crosswalks on Oak Bay Avenue beyond Monterey makes crossing the street to catch a bus dangerous. There are numerous apartments and condos on Newport and Beach Drive, but the existing sidewalk and crosswalk infrastructure is a disincentive to walking to the Village.

We did not walk along Foul Bay Road toward Fort Street, but the majority of people who came on the walks told us they frequently walk along the Oak Bay side of Foul Bay on their way to Save On Foods and the liquor store. Sidewalks on this segment of Foul Bay Road are very narrow, in places blocked by overgrown shrubbery, often with crumbling pavement and at close proximity to the street. Foul Bay is such a busy road that people using walkers and scooters worry that pedestrians, who step out onto the street to get around them, are at risk of being hit by a car.

One other issue that was brought to our attention is the problem some people who use walkers, scooters, or wheelchairs experience when it's necessary to activate a crossing signal, sometimes called a "beg button," to get the traffic light to change so they can cross the street. "Beg buttons" at Monterey, Elgin and Foul Bay are all inconveniently located for people to reach when they must maneuver a scooter or wheelchair to get to the button and then get themselves repositioned to where they need to be to cross the street in the allotted time.

Suggestions we heard from participants on the walks and on the street

- Keep the “temporary” extended sidewalks and add extensions to sidewalks that have not been widened. Construct new sidewalks to be level with existing sidewalks to create a new wide sidewalk.
- Make the temporary bulb outs at crosswalks permanent and replace the bollards with something attractive such as greenery or planters.
- Raise crosswalks to the height of sidewalks. This will eliminate curb lips and slow the speed of traffic along Oak Bay Avenue.
- Eliminate “beg buttons” at Foul Bay, Monterey and Elgin.
- Move the garbage can by Hughes so it does not impede sidewalk traffic.
- Require businesses with patios to make patios the same height as the sidewalk, and require Starbucks to fence off the area of its outdoor seating (or build a street patio).
- Provide more benches, assure they are located off the sidewalk so they don't impede pedestrian traffic, and where possible arrange them in a conversational pattern instead of lining them up. Make sure the height and design of the benches is suitable and comfortable for older adults.
- Create some pocket parks where people can sit and visit without needing to buy food or drinks.
- Make the ramp at Hampshire by TD Bank big enough to accommodate wheelchairs and scooters turning at the top of the ramp.
- Prioritize reconstructing older curb cuts that have raised lips. Replace them with curb cuts like those newly constructed on parts of Victoria Avenue. (People are very positive about the wide, flattened curb cuts.)

“Require all planners, engineers and Council members to spend an entire day using a walker, wheelchair or scooter. Don't let them off...make them use the walker for shopping, in their home doing all their housework, getting to and from everywhere they go (whether walking or getting on the bus). Then they'll see what we deal with everyday. Tell them to come out on the street and talk to us and see what it's like.” Suggestion from a walk participant

Summary

People we spoke with like living in Oak Bay because most the services they want and need are located in or near the Village. People of all ages like the proximity to the library and to recreation centres. They like the beauty of the mature trees, the attractive residential streets, and the proximity to the beach, to downtown Victoria and to UVIC. People like being able to walk or cycle in Oak Bay neighbourhoods. Most people who live in Oak Bay do not want to move to another municipality, and it's our impression that Oak Bay is one of the most desirable places to live in all the CRD.

In the 2016 census, 32% of the population of Oak Bay reported being over age 65. Oak Bay Avenue and surrounding streets are home to a high concentration of older adults, many of whom have downsized from single family homes to apartments, condos, and assisted living facilities. Many use walking as their primary mode of transportation, and those who still drive realize they may need to give up their driver's licenses in the not-too-distant future. All want to maintain their independence as long as they can. Some have few family members living in Victoria or nearby.

Much as people like Oak Bay, the present condition of sidewalks and crosswalks is not adequate to assure a safe, pleasant walking environment. Solutions for improving walkability range from quick fixes, which are relatively inexpensive, to major changes in infrastructure, which will require an investment in order to build a community that will be more livable for all Oak Bay residents. Making Oak Bay a more walkable community is in keeping with climate action to reduce greenhouse gases by providing transportation alternatives to the private automobile.

As pedestrian advocates, we recommend that the proposed Pedestrian and Sidewalk Master Plan be adopted as soon as possible and that implementation begin soon after. We recommend that changes to Oak Bay Avenue be a priority due to the large number of people who live on or near the Avenue and others in the community who work and/or use services on the Avenue. Oak Bay Avenue has potential to be the most vibrant, eco-friendly, attractive shopping and service district in greater Victoria and to serve as a model for other municipalities.

Jean and Tom Newton

** We appreciate the support we received from the Community Association of Oak Bay, staff at Oak Bay Municipal Hall, the enthusiastic people who participated on the walks, those who spoke with us on the street, and everyone who shared their personal accounts of walking in Oak Bay.*