

Evidence and Promising Practices for Management of Outdoor Recreation and Active Travel Spaces during COVID-19: A guidance document for municipalities in Timiskaming

May 4, 2020

INTRODUCTION

Outdoor recreational spaces make important contributions to social well-being as well as physical and mental health.¹ During a public health emergency such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of these spaces by large numbers of people may increase the risk of community spread (see Appendix A for further data on COVID-19 transmission considerations in outdoor spaces).¹

This document was developed to support municipalities with decision-making related to the safer use of outdoor recreation and active travel spaces during the COVID-19 outbreak, to help in best serving all citizens. What follow are a rationale for encouraging access to outdoor recreation spaces where feasible and increasing space for active travel to allow physical distancing, as well as a brief summary of evidence for risk related decision making pertaining to these areas and COVID-19.

REDUCING DISEASE SPREAD

Both individual and community measures have been implemented in Ontario to stop the spread of COVID-19. Individual measures include: encouraging individuals to wash hands often with soap and water, avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands, avoid contact with those who are sick, staying home if sick and above all practicing physical distancing at all times.² Within this quickly-evolving situation, public interpretation of recommendations related to staying home and what may be considered an appropriate (or essential) outing has been understandably varied. To stop the spread of COVID-19 the Government of Ontario declared all outdoor recreational amenities closed across the province as of March 30 with the exception of walkthrough access to green spaces in parks, trails, ravines and conservation areas not otherwise closed.⁵

However, closure of parks, amenities, and green spaces restricts vital opportunity for population stress relief, physical activity and child development.^{1,6,7} An inability to safely practice physical distancing while using sidewalks presents the risks listed above as well as equity issues for those who rely on sidewalk travel for their essential errands and health and wellbeing.

Importance of Outdoor Recreation and Travel Spaces

Outdoor recreational spaces are essential for physical and social well-being.¹ The following has been noted in literature, academic and scientific bodies:

- Access to active play in nature and outdoors—with its risks—is essential for healthy child development.^{6,7}
- Green space can be preventative and restorative for mood disorders.⁸
- Nature is essential to our well-being. Proven health benefits of spending time in nature include: decreased depression/stress, reduced mortality from chronic diseases, reduced aggression, crime rates, violence, fear and enhanced personal and spiritual well-being.⁸
- The greater the time spent in a natural environment, the bigger the nature dose and the larger the health benefits.⁸

- Municipalities have a critical role in establishing a community-wide approach to increase access to unstructured outdoor play.⁹

Evidence shows that both small and large green spaces contribute to better health. There is also evidence that certain populations including pregnant women, people with low income, minority and ethnic groups, children and adolescents and older adults gain the most from increased access to outdoor green spaces. Apartment dwellers, without access to backyards, rely on these spaces for outdoor access.^{12,13}

It is difficult to capture in a timely way all the different ways that COVID-19 is impacting the population's well-being but data on mental health has recently become available. Closure of parks, amenities and green spaces as a result of COVID-19 has restricted opportunities for healthy outdoor activity and mental well-being with predicted dire health consequences.^{1,10} The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health in particular is expected to be severe.¹⁰ Early crowdsourcing data from Statistics Canada show significant stress from home confinement among people aged 15 to 24.¹¹ This population was more likely to report that they were very or extremely concerned about stress from confinement at home (41%), a concern they also shared with adults aged 35 to 44 (40%) who were more likely to be living with young children.¹¹ Morneau Shepell's Mental Health Index showed the majority of respondents (81 per cent) report the COVID-19 pandemic is negatively impacting their mental health.¹⁰ Mental health concerns and anxieties are expected to continue to worsen as COVID-19 escalates.¹⁰ Now is the time for governments to take action, ramp up mental health efforts and help people find ways to cope with stress during this pandemic while improving their mental and physical health.

MANAGING RISK

While it remains imperative that people reduce the number of trips outside of the home, exercise and basic weekly errands continue to be considered essential activities. The management of outdoor recreational and travel spaces requires a thoughtful analysis to balance the needs of the population against the potential risks of community spread.¹ Many municipalities across Ontario have balanced the risks of COVID-19 with the health and equity benefits of access to outdoor spaces (see Appendix B for examples).

Options for Risk Reduction in Outdoor Recreational Spaces

Maintaining safe access to outdoor recreational spaces is a challenge during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ However, providing safe access to outdoor spaces is possible using measures to reduce risk. A number of potential measures have been proven to reduce the risk of disease transmission in outdoor recreational spaces.¹ It is imperative however, that each recreational space be assessed for transmission risks such that the appropriate combination of measures can be implemented.¹ Furthermore it is important to acknowledge municipal opening and closure of outdoor recreational spaces within the restrictions of current provincial guidelines is voluntary and may be enacted or retracted based on transmission risk of COVID-19 and citizen compliance in following risk reduction measures as the pandemic advances and retreats.

Risk reduction measures include:

- **Maximize distance and minimize interaction** between park users.
- **Close or remove features** that cause visitors to gather, such as viewpoints or seating.
- **Close physical features** on which virus may have settled (e.g., playgrounds).
- **Sanitizing surfaces** may be necessary in specific situations, in which case priority should be given to smooth, non-porous surfaces on which the virus is most persistent.
- **Discourage activities that involve physical contact.**

- **Washrooms** may be a necessity. Public washrooms will require additional sanitation if they remain open.
- **Provide opportunities for hand hygiene.**
- Ensure that **trash containers** are available for discarding personal protective equipment.
- **Consider neighbourhood access** to parks before moving to restrict already limited options. Park space can be limited to local residents by closing parking lots.
- **Increase space available** to encourage dispersion and non-collective activities.
- **Update online park information** to reflect these new options for dispersion.
- **Increase enforcement of health orders** regarding physical distancing measures.

Options for Risk Reduction on Municipal Sidewalks and Roadways

Many of the same measures listed above apply to municipal sidewalks and roadways, where physical distancing is not feasible for sidewalk users and cyclists within their current design. In many cases, walkers (and those using mobility devices) must move off the sidewalk onto the roadway to maintain physical distancing. Municipalities are rebalancing streets to provide more space for people to move safely on sidewalks and on bicycles while observing physical distancing. An example of this would be to functionally widen sidewalks in areas with more sidewalk use by reducing parking to those without mobility issues or eliminating a second lane of traffic. Appendix B includes an inventory of street rebalancing efforts underway across Canada and a photo essay, including signage, of such efforts.

CONCLUSION

Municipalities have been faced with challenging decisions of whether to go beyond provincial emergency orders to stop the spread of COVID-19 and may also deliberate on local measures as provincial orders are gradually lifted. The challenge of balancing many priorities and making quick decisions during these evolving and uncommon times is remarkable. Moreover there may be barriers affecting municipalities' ability to put initiatives in place that manage risk while maintaining access to outdoor recreation and active travel spaces. Public health is available to support the integration of health and well-being into municipal decision-making, for example by exploring policy options or developing public communications and signage. Outdoor recreational spaces are essential for physical and social well-being.¹ The evidence presented in this document informs a number of potential actions and includes practical case examples from other municipalities for reducing the risk of COVID-19 transmission while permitting citizens to still access vital outdoor recreational and active travel spaces.

For more information, please contact Amanda Mongeon, Program Manager, at 705-647-4300, Ext. 2264 or mongeon@timiskaminghu.com.

Contributors: Janet Smale Research, Planning and Policy Analyst
 Susan Hall, Public Health Promoter
 Crystal Gorman, Public Health Promoter
 Amanda Mongeon, Program Manager
 Kerry Schubert-Mackey, Director

Reviewed by: Dr. Glenn Corneil, MOH (A)

Formatting/Graphic Support: Nicki Duke

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COVID-19 Transmission Summary: Considerations for Outdoor Recreational Spaces

WHAT IS COVID-19?

COVID-19 is an illness caused by a coronavirus. Symptoms of human coronaviruses may be very mild or more serious, such as fever, cough, and difficulty breathing and may take up to 14 days to clear after exposure to the virus (PHAC, 2020).

TRANSMISSION

What We Know

Person-to-Person:

Coronaviruses are most commonly spread from an infected person through:

- Respiratory droplets when coughing or sneezing
- Close personal contact, such as touching or shaking hands
- Touching something with the virus on it, then touching the eyes, nose or mouth before washing hands (PHAC, 2020).

Surface Transmission:

- Surface transmission is possible. However, in general, coronaviruses do not survive for long on objects. They can survive for around 3 hours on inert objects with dry surfaces and for around 6 days on inert objects with wet surfaces (Gouvernement du Québec, 2020).

ASSUMPTIONS

- Symptomatic cases of COVID-19 are causing the majority of transmission;
- Person-to-person transmission is mostly occurring via infectious respiratory droplets;
- Airborne transmission is not known to be routinely occurring in community settings;
- Fecal-oral and body fluid transmission of COVID-19 viruses could be occurring although risk is very low (Government of Canada, 2020).
- There is some evidence that COVID-19 transmission may be affected by changes in temperatures and humidity which may affect droplet viability (NCCEH, 2020).

Municipal Examples of Access to Outdoor Spaces

METHOD

On April 22 the Timiskaming Health Unit conducted a scan of municipal websites and social media sites to obtain information on what is happening across the province with regards to municipal outdoor spaces. On April 22, Timiskaming Health Unit staff participated in Share the Road's *Making Space for Physical Distancing in Ontario* webinar, learning about street rebalancing efforts in Ontario and beyond.

On March 30, the Government of Ontario closed all communal or shared, public or private, outdoor recreational amenities everywhere in Ontario due to COVID-19. Green spaces in parks, trails, ravines and conservation areas that weren't otherwise closed could remain open for walkthrough access. The purpose of this search therefore was to review what municipalities were doing across Ontario to balance the risk of COVID-19 while keeping trails and outdoor recreation spaces open to the public.

EXAMPLES

Keeping Trails Open/Restriction

City/Town	Messaging	Social Media (if applicable)
Kingston	PH advises local trail networks to re- open if numbers remain stable	https://globalnews.ca/news/6822534/kfla-public-health-crca-open-trails-covid-19/
Waterloo	City of Waterloo trails are open during COVID-19 for distanced walking and bike trips. You are only to go out with your family unit, stay local and do not drive to a destination area. Do not use benches, park equipment, fields or playgrounds.	https://www.waterloo.ca/en/living/trails.aspx# *signage below
Aurora	The Town of Aurora trails are open for use and residents may utilize the pathways to walk through the parks. Please practice social distancing when using Aurora's trails and do not use park benches and picnic tables and avoid all high touch surfaces on your journeys.	https://www.aurora.ca/en/covid-19.aspx
County of Brant	Trails and parks (not playgrounds) owned and/or managed by the County of Brant remain OPEN, but you MUST practice physical distancing and maintain a minimum of 2 metres / 6 feet from others.	https://www.brant.ca/en/county-government/covid-19.aspx#Playground-and-Recreational-Amenities-are-CLOSED
Richmond Hill	Parks and trails remain open for walkthrough and cycling access only. If you are visiting a park or trail, please practice physical distancing, do not use any park amenities and do not congregate in groups.	https://www.richmondhill.ca/en/find-or-learn-about/novel-coronavirus.aspx
Peterborough	Parks and trails open for walk-through access	https://www.peterborough.ca/en/explore-and-play/parks-and-trails.aspx

City/Town	Messaging	Social Media (if applicable)
Saugeen Shores	Green spaces & parks open for walk-through access	https://www.saugeenshores.ca/en/town-hall/covid-19.aspx#
Town of Caledon	At present green spaces in parks and trails remain open for walkthrough access, but individuals must maintain the safe physical distance of at least two metres apart from others.	https://www.caledon.ca/en/townhall/coronavirus.asp
Barrie	Green space in trails and parks remain open for walkthrough access, however the public is reminded to follow the SHMDU to avoid crowds and maintain a safe distance of 2m from those around you.	https://www.barrie.ca/Living/City%20Services/Pages/COVID-19-Impacted-City-Services.aspx *Signage example below
Belleville	Waterfront trails open. Enjoy trails but use wisely.	https://belleville.ca/news/details
City Mississauga	Green spaces and park trails remain open for walking as long as physical distancing is maintained.	http://www.mississauga.ca/portal/residents/parks-recreational-trails

Street Rebalancing

Canada-wide Street Rebalancing Inventory	Velo-Canada Bikes has developed a database of street rebalancing efforts across Canada	https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/19X2GhrVSv8_v5s3gfXvqt8rnM5iU99wpI51LbRYou2U/edit#gid=2054921953
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Sample Signage/Language

The City of Peterborough
21 hrs · 🌐

Warm weather this weekend means many of us will spend time outdoors. Parks & trails remain open but recreational amenities are closed. Practice #PhysicalDistancing by staying 2m apart. Avoid busy places & don't gather in groups.
#staysafepb | <http://peterborough.ca/COVID19>

COVID-19

Your Guide to Safe Outdoor Activities

Outdoor recreational amenities remain closed, but green spaces and trails are open. Even if you have no symptoms of COVID-19 you must still practice physical distancing when you're outdoors.

When outdoors:

- Stay at least 2m apart from others
- Do not gather in groups
- Step off trail or sidewalk when encountering others
- Be aware of high-touch points such as benches
- Keep dogs on a leash

Do not visit or use:

- Outdoor exercise equipment
- Park shelters, picnic areas
- Beaches
- Playgrounds, skateboard parks
- Off-leash dog park
- Baseball diamonds, soccer pitches, and courts (tennis, basketball, volleyball)

Stay home if you have symptoms.
Choose low-risk activities; hospitals don't need more patients. Minimize contact with others, and with high-touch surfaces. Stay local and spread out.

The City of Barrie
May 2 at 11:39 AM · 🌐

A Guide to Safe Outdoor Activities During COVID-19

Barrie's outdoor recreational amenities remain closed, but our green spaces and trails are open. If you have no symptoms of COVID-19 it is imperative that you still practice safe physical distancing while you enjoy the outdoors. If you have symptoms, please stay home.

For your safety and ours, please:

- Practice safe physical distancing of at least two arms' length (at least 2 metres)
- Do not gather in groups
- If you encounter others on the trail, simply step off the trail or sidewalk to ensure a safe physical distance;
- Be aware of high touch points such as benches.
- Keep dogs on leash at all times, and
- Please stay home if you exhibit any symptoms of illness.

We remind residents that many of our outdoor amenities are closed in Barrie until further notice. Please do not visit or use:

- Outdoor exercise equipment
- Park shelters and picnic areas
- Playgrounds
- Dog off-leash parks
- Sports fields (ball diamonds, soccer pitches, tennis/basketball/volleyball courts)
- Beaches
- Skateboard parks

Please walk on the grass within parks if needed to ensure safe physical distancing of at least 2 metres.

City of London, Ontario - Municipal Government
May 2 at 2:00 PM · 🌐

If you're out for a walk in one of #LdnOnt ESAs during this time of #COVID19, please remember that along with physical distancing, to use the official access points indicated on the trail maps & ensure all pets are on a leash (max 2m/6ft).
<https://bit.ly/3cj8R9E>

For a list of services that remain available, visit:
london.ca/covid-19

COVID-19 NOTICE

City of Mississauga - Municipal Government
22 hrs · 🌐

REMINDER: Our playground equipment and park amenities remain closed until further notice to stop the spread of #COVID19. Call 311 to report anyone using our park amenities such as sports courts, picnic tables, playground equipment & park benches.

COVID-19 Park Restrictions

- ❌ No access to parking lots
- ❌ No access to playground equipment and other amenities
- ❌ No gatherings of more than 5 people (unless members of a single household)
- ✅ Yes to using our park trails but maintain physical distancing (2 metres apart)

mississauga.ca/coronavirus MISSISSAUGA

City of Toronto - Your Local Government
April 26 at 10:23 AM · 🌐

#StayHomeTO! Remember that the #COVID19 enforcement team is patrolling parks and ticketing those that do not practise #physicaldistancing. Any 2 people who don't live together, who fail to keep 2 metres apart in a park, are subject to a \$1,000 fine. <https://www.toronto.ca/.../covid-19-orders-directives-by-laws/>

Sample Signage/Language (Cont'd)

HISTORIC COBALT THE CORPORATION OF THE TOWN OF COBALT

Press Release: Town of Cobalt April 21, 2020

EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY
BY PROVINCIAL ORDER UNDER THE
EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT & CIVIL PROTECTION ACT

PARK AMENITIES
CLOSED

WALKTHROUGH ACCESS ONLY

Playgrounds
Dog Parks
Sports Fields
Benches/Tables

OPEN

Green spaces in parks and trails will remain open for walking access at this time but, individuals must stay 2 metres (6 feet) apart **AND** avoid social gatherings of more than five (5) people.

COVID-19 SAFETY WARNING
Public Health Officials remind you to:

Stay home if you are sick.
 Avoid touching surfaces.
 While walking in the park, please practice social distancing of 2m (6 feet).
 Wash your hands with soap and water and/or use a hand sanitizer frequently.

18 Glen Street, Box 70, Cobalt, ON, Canada R0J 1G2
 Tel: 705-679-8877 • Fax: 705-679-9000 • Email: cobalt@cobalt.ca • www.cobalt.ca

City of Waterloo
 March 27

You'll start to see these signs posted in public spaces that traditionally draw crowds.

A friendly reminder to practice physical distancing while still enjoying the increasingly warm weather 🤙🤙🤙

Ontario Trails
 16 April at 19:29

Ontario Trails - Reinforces Emergency Order - <https://mailchi.mp/.../31-3-2020-ontario-trails-emergency-ord...>

MAILCHIMP
Ontario Trails - Reinforces Emergency Order
 The personal and public protocol required by emergency orders, and...

[Trail Etiquette and COVID-19: Guidance from Ontario Trails Association](#)

Examples of Street Rebalancing (click on image to for more detail)

The Centre for Active Transportation - TCAT
 April 23 at 2:21 PM

A photo collection of Canadian examples of how cities - large, small, urban, suburban - are making space for physical distancing by rapidly deploying barriers to create sidewalks and bike lanes out of under-used road space. Have more examples? Send us a message!

Making Space for Physical Distancing

A Photo Collection of Examples from across Canada

City of Brampton – Your Local Government
 April 17 at 5:42 PM

Just released | City implements interim bike lanes to promote safe active transportation opportunities during COVID-19 pandemic. More here: <http://ow.ly/fvOJ50zhABB>