



Policy

Multi-Use Pathways

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Halifax Cycling Coalition

Policy Statement on Multi-Use Pathways

January 2025

Summary

Multi-use pathways (MUPs) require people walking, rolling and cycling to share the same space. MUPs are used as a substitute for separate and protected bike lanes even though they are unsuitable in most of our urban corridors and high-volume contexts: they prioritise vehicle use, delay modal shift in the municipality, and fuel pedestrian-cyclist conflicts. It is the HCC position that bicycle infrastructure in urban settings be separated from people walking and rolling, and protected from vehicle traffic.



Background

Cities looking to make active mobility safer, more convenient, and accessible have a range of design options. In Halifax, the safety of vulnerable road users must be the first priority, consistent with the hierarchy set out in the Integrated Mobility Plan (2017), which prioritises those walking/rolling followed by those cycling.¹ The final design must also be appropriate for the context and capable of supporting current and anticipated demand.

Unfortunately, we are witnessing an increased reliance on multi-use pathways (MUP, sometimes called multi-use trails or shared-use paths) in urban settings. This reliance appears to go beyond [HRM's own understanding of MUPs](#) as "AT Trails and Greenways." Halifax Cycling Coalition (HCC) is deeply concerned to see MUPs included in designs and in circumstances where they are unsuitable, as in the 60% redesign plan for the Windsor Street Exchange, which we will discuss in more detail below to illustrate our points.

Risks and Drawbacks of MUPs

According to the National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO), MUPs should only be used for "high-speed limited access roadways, natural corridors, or geographic edge conditions with limited conflicts" where there is expected to be low pedestrian volume."² In conditions with high pedestrian volume, NACTO's minimum recommendation is a separate pedestrian-only lane within the MUP.

MUPs, as currently done across Halifax, pose significant risks to intended users by compromising their safety and comfort. Compared to separated facilities, our everyday experiences and studies demonstrate that MUPs increase conflicts between people walking and cycling.³ These conflicts are invariably due to the fact that people walking and cycling are asked to share a space that is not sufficiently wide to safely accommodate all users.

MUPs make both walking and cycling less attractive to their intended users. People walking regularly risk being hit by a person cycling in the event of a bike malfunction or a loss of control from debris or ice on the path. People cycling regularly worry that people walking will move unexpectedly into their lane or trip and fall into their route of travel resulting in a collision. People walking often move in groups, push strollers, walk their pets, and as such their behaviour can be highly unpredictable. People walking use headphones, making it difficult or impossible to alert them using bike bells.

¹ [Integrated Mobility Plan \(IMP\)](#)

² [Choosing an All Ages & Abilities Bicycle Facility | National Association of City Transportation Officials](#)

³ [Canadian Medical Association Journal](#). Segregated bike lanes are safest for cyclists.



MUPs are particularly unsafe for blind and partially sighted people:⁴ Their safety and comfort depend on the separation of the sidewalk for people walking and rolling from the cycle track for people cycling and using micro-mobility devices.

Steep grades as found in many locations in Halifax are unsuitable for MUPs. Bicycles going downhill will pick up speed, making it more unsafe and intimidating for those walking, particularly with walkers or strollers. NACTO recommends⁵ a maximum grade of 5% but we recommend an even lower maximum of 3% which is what the City of Markham guidelines⁶ call for.

Bidirectional MUPs pose further dangers to the users where the paths cross roadways. Drivers of motor vehicles crossing these paths have to look both ways for pedestrians and cyclists, all the while checking for oncoming traffic. This additional cognitive workload on drivers is a recipe for errors in judgement and unsafe manoeuvres.

MUPs introduce additional complexities and risks at intersections. Often, MUPs become indistinguishable from a regular sidewalk crossing, without sufficient room for both pedestrians and cyclists. There is ambiguity around whether a cyclist on a MUP should cross with the walk signals or the green light signal.

We are witnessing increasing use of electric scooters and electric bikes that are capable of high speeds on the flat or even uphill. These options will make micro mobility much more common but will also put pedestrians at risk when the space is shared.

MUPs are detrimental towards achieving Halifax's long-term mobility goals. It is true that MUPs require less space than a protected bikeway separated from a sidewalk. However, MUP's are not only used to replace existing sidewalks, by squeezing pedestrians and cyclists in a minimally required space, they perpetuate a car-centric design philosophy. Halifax's strategic plans call for a significant modal shift. The IMP prioritises people walking, rolling, and cycling over cars. If these commitments have any substance, then they should be reflected in the allocation of space on our roads through "road diets" and protected bike lanes that shift priority from personal cars to other modes.

MUPs fail not only people walking, rolling and cycling, they are also a defeatist strategy. We must build it right and build for what we need now. We are often presented with the facile argument that "we should simply get something built and then improve it later once the demand is there." Who says the demand is not already there? Among the major metropolitan

⁴ [Consumer Access Group](#)

⁵ NACTO, [Shared Use Path Accessibility Guidelines](#)

⁶ [City of Markham Pathway and Trail Design Guidelines](#)



areas, Halifax already has the second-highest rate of active transportation use.⁷ So, the logic that Halifax needs to build up the demand for cycling is not supported by evidence. And this is despite the fact that Halifax lags behind all major Canadian cities in terms of its protected cycling infrastructure. A plan for success recognizes that the number of people cycling is increasing and builds for success.

When a MUP is built, land is not set aside to facilitate future conversion to separated bikeways and walkways. The possibility of a future separation of sidewalks and bikeways is thus a dark future for people walking, rolling, and cycling. They will again be asked to “make the case” on a road where the “space is limited.” It is a discriminatory groundwork against people walking, rolling, and cycling to defend yet again their rights and priorities.

This is not pure speculation. Across Canada trails are already becoming congested and unsafe, and yet there does not appear to be any urgency to do something about overcrowding.⁸ Retrofitting is not only time consuming, it is also disproportionately more expensive. Does the municipality want MUPs to turn into shackles for its active transportation and modal shift ambitions?

Given these considerations, we concur with the prevailing opinion among cycling advocacy organisations by insisting that MUPs should never replace existing sidewalks, and when used should be designed to the highest standards.⁹

The Windsor Street Exchange

We would like to provide one recent design where the municipality has demonstrated an inability to apply its own priorities, and demonstrably prioritised cars over people walking, rolling, cycling and using public transit.

The Windsor Street Exchange is unfriendly to people walking, rolling, and cycling. Current usage by vulnerable road users is a reflection of the current design, and not the latent demand. Moreover, the area is encircled by multiple Future Growth Nodes and is ideally positioned to

⁷ Based on data from Statistics Canada: [From May 2023 to May 2024, Nova Scotia reported the fastest growth in the share of active transport commuters](#) “Nova Scotia reported that 8.6% of commuters relied on active transportation such as walking or cycling. This was the highest share of active transportation commuters among provinces. Nationally, 6.0% of commuters used active transportation, with the lowest portion in Alberta.” [Commuters in Victoria and Halifax most likely to walk or bike to work](#) “Active transportation was more prevalent in Victoria (18.7%) and Halifax (12.3%) than in other CMAs, potentially driven by the smaller size and milder climate of these cities.”

⁸ [What can be done about overcrowded multi-use paths? - Canadian Cycling Magazine](#)

⁹ [HUB Cycling Recommendations for Multi-Use Paths](#)



have high pedestrian and cyclist volumes. Yet, the 60% [redesign](#) calls for a bidirectional MUP on the south side of the Exchange by replacing the existing sidewalks. The design does not meet NACTO's recommendations. It does not meet the most basic needs, rights, and priorities of people walking, rolling, and cycling.

Conclusion

HCC is not categorically opposed to MUPs. However, HCC is deeply concerned that the growing blanket reliance on MUPs by the municipality will continue to disadvantage people walking, rolling, and cycling, prioritise vehicle use, delay modal shift in the municipality, and fuel pedestrian-cyclist conflict. Bicycle infrastructure in urban settings needs to be separated from people walking and rolling, and protected from vehicle traffic. MUPs are unsuitable in most of our urban corridors.

