

LANEWAYS AS BIKEWAYS

OPPORTUNITIES REPORT



Prepared by the Canadian Urban Institute
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Laneways as Bikeways was created to explore opportunities for using laneways to address current gaps in the Toronto cycling network.

The project included research and consultation with cyclists, non-cyclists and stakeholders to assess whether laneways could be used safely by cyclists to move around the city.

The rationale for undertaking the project was that, despite significant process and on-going investment in cycling infrastructure, Toronto's cycling network is still fragmented. Laneways, which are separated from the roads and run throughout the downtown and surrounding neighbourhoods, could potentially provide a way for cyclists to avoid busy streets and intersections, while the city builds out its cycling network.

This report presents the key findings and outlines the potential roles that laneways can play in Toronto's cycling network.

The key findings are:

1. People already cycle in laneways.
2. There are mixed opinions on whether laneways make good cycling routes.
3. Laneways aren't an alternative to bike lanes, but can play a role in the cycling network.
4. Laneway improvements can help to unlock the potential of laneways for cyclists and pedestrians.
5. Cycling interventions should be combined with other improvements to make laneways better public spaces.

6. Shared space principles can be applied to laneways to accommodate cyclists and other users.

Four potential roles for laneways in the cycling network include:

1. First and last mile to daily destinations
2. Residential access
3. Construction detour
4. Commercial business access and bike storage

While implementing improvements in all laneways in the city would be extremely costly and unrealistic, improvements to laneways can be made on a case-by-case basis in order to make them safer and more convenient for cyclists, as well as pedestrians.

The research also identified four possible tactics for implementing the opportunities described in the report:

- Through demonstration projects;
- As development occurs;
- With continued policy and programming changes; and
- Through improved service delivery and increased City budget allocation.

LANEWAYS AS BIKEWAYS – ARE THEY FEASIBLE?

Laneways as Bikeways is a collaborative research project that is seeking to understand the feasibility of using laneways as cycling routes in Toronto.

The project is being conducted by the Canadian Urban Institute (CUI), The Laneway Project and Community Bicycle Network, and is funded through the Metcalf Foundation's Cycle City Program. It explores how cyclists currently use laneways, the level of support for using laneways as bikeways, and the challenges and opportunities for adapting Toronto's laneways to create safe and efficient cycling routes.

Research Questions

- Can laneways provide a safe alternative to cycling on streets where bike lanes don't yet exist? Are there examples of this in other cities?
- What design or safety measures might make it safer and more convenient to cycle in laneways?
- Could laneways offer more immediate, temporary and lower-cost solutions while the City implements the Ten Year Cycling Plan?

PROJECT TEAM:



FUNDED BY:

METCALF
FOUNDATION

The three main components of the project are:

1. Background Research Report

Our team conducted research into Toronto's cycling and laneway network, cycling trends, safety issues, and what makes a bikeable city. We also conducted a jurisdictional scan that looked at other cities that have considered the use of laneways for cycling. The Background Research Report can be found [here](#).

2. Consultation

A survey and a series of consultations were conducted to understand the barriers and opportunities for using laneways as cycle routes. Interviews were held with key stakeholders, including cycling groups, City staff and Councillors. A focus group provided an opportunity to gather in-depth feedback from both cyclists and non-cyclists. The survey received 786 responses. A summary of the survey results can be found [here](#).

3. Opportunities Report

This Opportunities Report summarizes the key findings and opportunities identified through the research and consultation.

RATIONALE: WHY CONSIDER LANEWAYS AS CYCLE ROUTES

WHY CYCLING?

Cycling is a nearly zero carbon form of active transportation that creates virtually no noise or air pollution. It requires only a small fraction of the space needed for the use and parking of cars and offers valuable cardiovascular exercise and other health benefits. Cycling costs less than private cars and public transport, both in direct user costs and public infrastructure costs.

Mobility is a major issue in Toronto. Travel demand continues to rise as the population increases and our economy grows, but new infrastructure has not been able to keep up. Advancing the City's cycling network is one of the strategies being pursued to improve mobility.

The City of Toronto Official Plan, the (Draft) Downtown Plan, and the Complete Streets Guidelines promote the complete streets approach to street design. The policies in these documents encourage a variety of modes of transportation, with an emphasis on more active forms, including cycling.



PHOTO CREDIT: JANICE LEE

In 2016, the City of Toronto released the Cycling Network Ten Year Plan, which outlines the planned investments in cycling infrastructure over the next 10 years. While the number of bike trails, paths and painted and protected cycling lanes continues to grow, the overall network is still fragmented. Building out the cycling network will take significant investment over many years, meaning that there are still areas of the city without adequate cycling infrastructure.

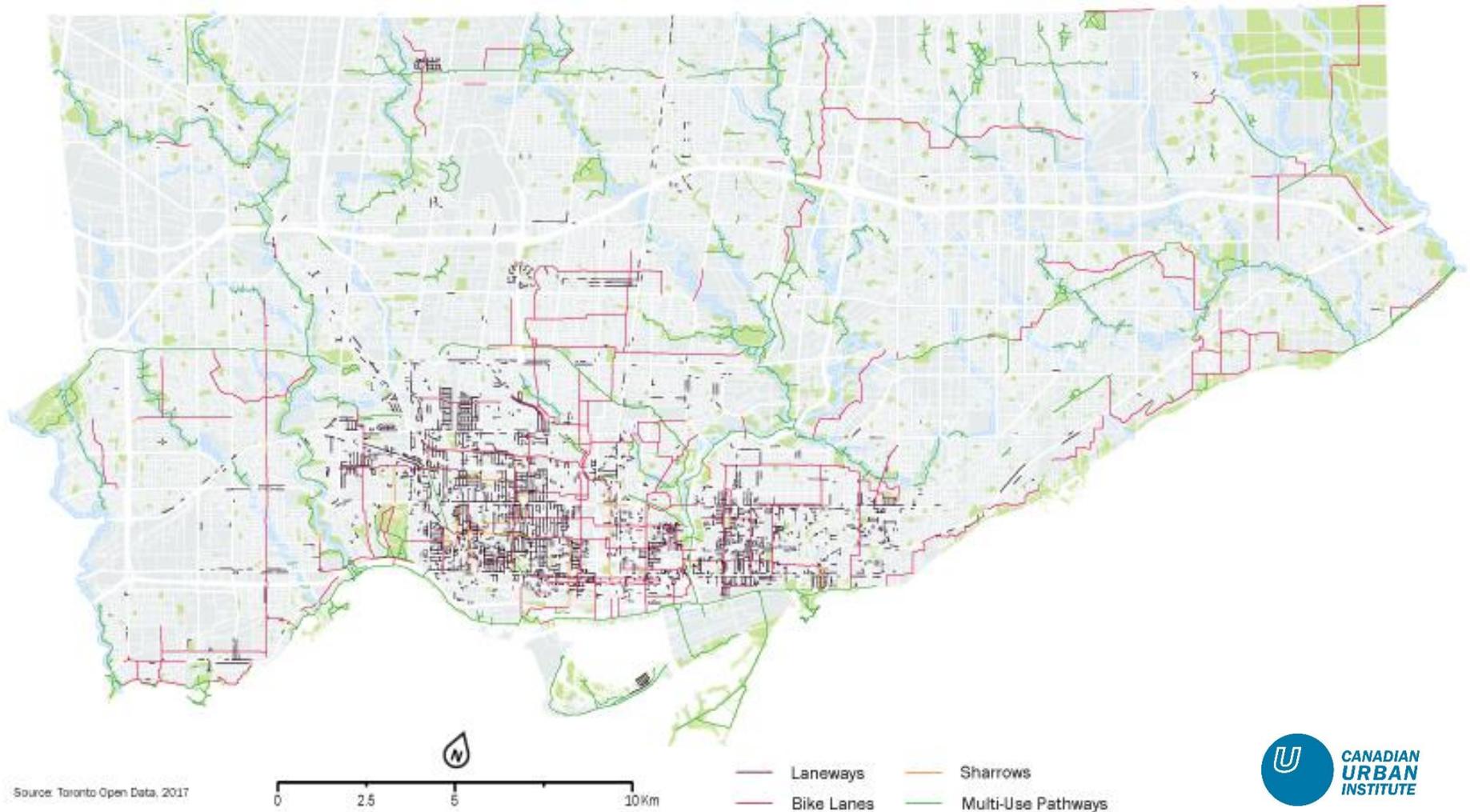
WHY LANEWAYS?

There are more than 2400 laneways in Toronto, spanning over 300 linear kilometers. Most laneways are public rights-of-way that are owned and managed by the City. For the most part, laneways in Toronto are used to store garbage, provide access to garages, and receive commercial deliveries, meaning they are empty for most of the day and have the potential to be much more active parts of our public realm.

Laneways are separated from the main roads, which could give cyclists an opportunity to ride away from traffic. Separating cyclists from the road has been proven to improve real and perceived safety, and to increase the likelihood that people will choose to cycle.

Yet, the current shape and state of repair of Toronto's laneways present challenges for cyclists. Many people don't even consider using laneways to get around the city; they're often dark and dirty, and can feel unsafe. A focused effort would be required to encourage more widespread cycling in laneways.

LANEWAYS AND BIKEWAYS IN TORONTO ([VIEW ONLINE](#))



PART ONE: KEY FINDINGS

KEY FINDING #1: PEOPLE ALREADY CYCLE IN LANEWAYS

Many cyclists and pedestrians use laneways to move around the city. The Laneways as Bikeways survey found that almost 60% of respondents currently cycle in laneways.

According to the results of our survey, people who cycle in laneways do so because: they make good short cuts to destinations, there is less traffic, and for some, they feel safer than roads. Respondents also said that laneways help them to avoid busy or dangerous intersections and can be used as alternative routes during construction.

This finding supports the idea that laneways are shared spaces. They are places where people on foot, in cars and trucks, and on bikes use the same space and work around one another. As a result, laneways encourage lower traffic speeds and require everyone to pay more attention to their surroundings.



The fact that so many people already cycle in laneways has important implications for planning, policy-making, as well as the City budget. Laneways, are public spaces. They should be planned and maintained in a way that ensures they are safe for all users. This includes well-kept paving, safe sanitary conditions, proper lighting, as well as traffic calming and safety measures.

SURVEY RESULTS

- 60% of survey respondents cycle in laneways
- People who cycle in laneways, do so because:
 - They make good short cuts to destinations (71%)
 - There is less traffic in laneways (62%)
 - Laneways feel safer than road (53%)
- 'Other' the common reasons for cycling in laneways:
 - Avoid going the wrong way on a one-way street
 - Access to their home or destination began or ended in a laneway
 - Avoid turning at busy/dangerous intersections
 - Avoid construction on main roads
 - Connect fragmented bike lanes/routes
 - Cycle on a wider path that allows for two-astride

KEY FINDING #2: THERE ARE MIXED OPINIONS ON WHETHER LANEWAYS MAKE GOOD CYCLING ROUTES

Some people think laneways offer a creative solution to address gaps in the cycling network, while others have strong concerns about safety, feasibility and the potential risk of taking attention away from building on-streets cycling routes.

A key concern among the cycling community was that encouraging cycling in laneways could take attention away from a push to build protected, on-street bike lanes. Cycling advocates felt strongly that the focus needs to remain on developing a minimum grid of protected bike lanes and implementing the 10-Year Cycling Plan.

Among City staff, safety was a major concern. There was a belief that cyclists who currently use laneways are generally familiar with the neighbourhood and understand the potential risks associated with being in the laneway. If cycling in laneways was encouraged more widely, they thought that people may find themselves in less familiar spaces and be unaware of safety risks.

Many survey respondents were also concerned about safety, while others raised issues regarding the convenience of using laneways.

Those who supported the idea felt that laneways could be a viable interim solution for improving Toronto's cycling network while the City builds out the cycling infrastructure plan. Many people suggested that laneways could help people to avoid busy streets, and that they can actually be safer than cycling on roads.

■ SURVEY RESULTS

Do you see laneways as a viable, interim solution for improving Toronto's cycling network, while the City builds out its bicycle infrastructure network?

No:

- “There are just too many dangers with where laneways meet street/exits and would be too costly to address. Focus on protected street bike lanes funding for the long term and in the short term, continue to invest/build/spend on real bike lanes where possible.”
- “Bikes belong on roadways, not relegated to back lanes.”
- “Where I live, laneways usually dead-end, so they are rarely useful. And even if they are reasonably paved, poor maintenance means I have to worry about punctures.”

Yes:

- “Minimal implementation to create practical and efficient routes and structure for cycling safety.”
 - “Not just an interim solution - laneways are a great place to cycle other than crumbling pavement, and should be a meaningful part of the network.”
 - “I always plan my routes based on bike lane presence and/or avoiding busy streets. Laneways provide a method of avoiding busy streets”
-

KEY FINDING #3: LANEWAYS AREN'T AN ALTERNATIVE TO BIKE LANES, BUT CAN PLAY A ROLE IN THE CYCLING NETWORK

There are a range of critical safety and ease-of-use issues that prevent laneways from acting as full cycling routes - but there can still be a role for laneways in enhancing the cycling network.

Toronto's laneway network is not continuous and therefore does not provide a convenient way for people to travel around the city on a bike. Many laneways are dead-ends and the variety of shapes and sizes make them unpredictable as cycling routes. This is especially an issue for utilitarian cyclists who require fast, direct routes to their destinations.

There are also many critical safety issues that prevent laneways from acting as safe cycling routes, such as:

- Residents reversing out of garages into the laneway may have trouble seeing cyclists
- A cyclist exiting a laneway onto the street may surprise motorists who are not expecting cyclists
- Laneway often have poor sightlines and are secluded
- Poor lighting makes laneways feel unsafe at night, especially for women
- Potholes and debris in laneways can create dangerous conditions for cyclists

The current approach to laneway maintenance laneways (cleaned once per year, repaved every 25 years, and seldom ploughed in winter) is not sufficient to support increased use by cyclists. Service vehicles and delivery trucks also create obstacles for cyclists, especially in narrow laneways.

Given these challenges, among others, laneways are not a viable alternative to on-street bike lanes.

However, this research has concluded that, on a case-by-case basis, individual laneways can be improved so that they are safe routes for cyclists, as well as pedestrians.

Four potential roles for laneways in the cycling network include:

1. Commercial business access and bike storage
2. The first and last mile to daily destinations
3. Accessing residential properties
4. Alternative routes during construction

These four roles are described in more detail in Part Two.

SURVEY RESULTS

What are the most significant safety and ease-of-use issues for cyclists in laneways?

- 1) Poor visibility exiting laneways (39%)
 - 2) Poor paving quality (37%)
 - 3) Wayfinding/not knowing where laneways start/end (35%)
 - 4) Laneway exits onto a one-way street or the wrong direction of traffic' (32%)
 - 5) 'Poor visibility in the laneway' (30%)
-

KEY FINDING #4: LANEWAY IMPROVEMENTS CAN HELP TO UNLOCK THE POTENTIAL OF LANEWAYS FOR CYCLISTS AND PEDESTRIANS

For laneways to be safe for cyclists and pedestrians, improvements are needed. New design and safety features could be implemented to make laneways more active parts of our transportation network.

The following interventions could be implemented to improve the safety and usability of laneways for cyclists and pedestrians:



SIGNAGE

- Signage in the laneway to make motorists aware of cyclists and pedestrians (and vice-versa)
- Signage when entering a laneway, indicating that it is a cycling/through-route
- Signage where the laneway meets the road to indicate the street name and direction



TRAFFIC CALMING

- Speed bumps (with openings for cyclists) or bump-outs in the laneway to slow down traffic
- Speed bumps where the laneway meets the sidewalk to encourage cyclists to slow down before exiting



PAVEMENT MARKINGS

- Road painting in the laneway and/or where the laneway meets the road, to make motorists aware of cyclists and pedestrians (and vice-versa)



PAVING AND MAINTENANCE

- Improved paving
- Increased paving maintenance (e.g. filling potholes)



LIGHTING

- Increased pedestrian/cyclist-level lighting



OTHER SAFETY MEASURES

- Fisheye mirrors at tight corners in laneway
- Restricting parking on the street at the entrance of a laneway to improve visibility
- Marked/reduced traffic speed in the laneway



CYCLING FACILITIES

- Bike racks in the laneway, on the edge of properties adjacent to the laneway



WASTE MANAGEMENT

- Improved waste storage and management



EDUCATION

- Education for all users about the rules of the road in laneways

Implementing these improvements in all laneways in the city would be extremely costly and time consuming. However, on a case-by-case basis, a selection of these features can be added to laneways to make them safer and more convenient for both cyclists and pedestrians. The specific interventions would be dependent on local conditions of the laneway.

KEY FINDING #5: CYCLING INTERVENTIONS, COMBINED WITH OTHER IMPROVEMENTS, CAN MAKE LANEWAYS BETTER PUBLIC SPACES

There is a growing recognition that laneways are an important part of the city’s public space network. Cycling-related improvements can be paired with other improvements that improve laneways as public spaces.

Toronto, especially the downtown, has been growing at an exceptionally high rate for the last 10 years. Since 2006, the population of the city has grown by 230,000 people, including 69,000 people downtown. This growth is putting increasing pressure on our city’s parks and public spaces. New and improved public spaces are needed to meet demand.

Laneways, which exist within Toronto’s highest-growth areas, provide an opportunity to expand the public realm. The City of Toronto Complete Streets Guidelines recognize this. They provide guidance on how to design laneways as active public spaces, through improvements like better lighting, lower motor vehicle speeds, minimized vehicle traffic, and use of durable street materials.

City of Toronto staff, as directed by Council, are now investigating a new policy framework for laneway suites which would give homeowners the ability to build an as-of-right secondary suite adjacent to a laneway for rental or family use. Council also directed staff to consider how the implementation of laneway suites could align with laneway animation objectives and how upgrades to laneways as public spaces could be achieved.

Given the need to expand our city’s public realm network and the fact that the City will likely soon be seeing more people living in laneways, it makes sense to combine improvements for cyclists with other types of improvements that make laneways better public spaces and active transportation routes for all users.

We also know that laneways are not appropriate for high-speed, commuter cyclists, but rather are shared spaces, where cyclists must ride slowly, and share the space with pedestrians and vehicles.

Public realm improvements could include:

- Hard landscaping
- Planters and other types of greening
- Laneway naming
- Decorative and gateway signage
- Murals and art



KEY FINDING #6: SHARED STREETS PRINCIPLES CAN BE APPLIED TO LANEWAYS TO ACCOMMODATE CYCLISTS AND OTHER USERS

Laneways are shared spaces that should be designed to accommodate all users. The principles of shared streets provide important considerations for the design of laneways.

Shared streets are an increasingly popular approach to street design. They minimize the segregation between modes of use by removing features such as curbs, road surface markings, traffic signs, and traffic lights. In Toronto, several streets have been reimagined as shared spaces, including Market Street in the St. Lawrence Market and St. George Street on the U of T campus.

The use of shared streets in Toronto and around the world can offer some important insights and considerations for the design of laneways as cycling and pedestrian routes. Key features of shared streets that could be adapted for laneways include: entrances or gateways, paving at a single grade, streetscaping, designing for lower traffic speeds, street furniture and planters.

The City of Toronto Complete Streets Guidelines provide a series of design considerations for shared spaces that are applicable to laneways:

- Create the conditions for low motor vehicle volumes and slow travel speeds to facilitate shared use of the street by pedestrians, cyclists and motor vehicles.
- For universal accessibility provide a direct and unobstructed walking path of adequate width, delineated by pavers and/or bollards with adequate contrast and detectability.

- Create a slow zone “feel” for the public space using design treatments (e.g., rightsized space, pavers, plantings, street furniture).
- In mixed-use settings, support commercial activity (such as occasional pedestrian-only streets for events/markets) or neighbourhood gathering, recreation and leisure, as appropriate to the context.
- Support flexible use of the right-of-way through all seasons including incorporating café seating in spring/ summer/fall, and short-term parking or drop-off in winter.
- Emphasize pedestrian activities while also accommodating motor vehicle access by service and delivery vehicles during non-peak hours.¹



¹ City of Toronto Complete Streets Guidelines (2017), Page 50.

PART TWO: OPPORTUNITIES BY LANEWAY TYPE

OPPORTUNITY BY LANEWAY TYPE: FIRST AND LAST MILE TO DAILY DESTINATIONS

Laneways can provide short-cuts that allow cyclists to reach daily destinations, while avoiding busy streets and intersections.

When on the way to a destination like a school, park, or workplace, a cyclist can choose to use the laneway as a short-cut for the last few hundred metres before their final destination. Similarly, when leaving a destination, rather than taking the main street, cyclists can use the laneway for the first few hundred metres. Once a cyclist leaves the laneway, they may be able to stay on less highly trafficked roads.

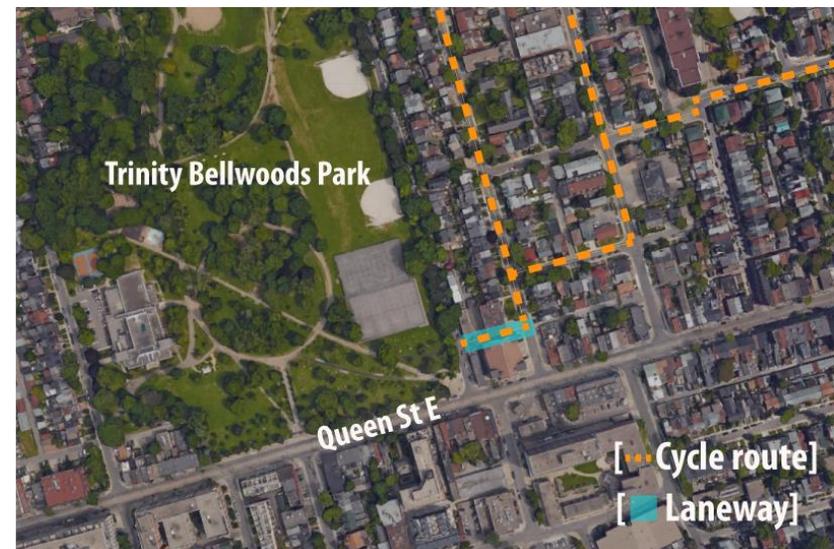
Many of the safety and ease-of-use interventions described in this report would be needed to make these laneway routes safer, more pleasant and convenient for cyclists. Appropriate interventions would need to be assessed on a case-by-case basis, but could include: signage, street painting, lighting and speed bumps. Improvements for cyclists could be paired with public realm improvements, creating not only a safe cycling route, but a new public space and expanded pedestrian network.

POSSIBLE LANEWAY IMPROVEMENTS

-  SIGNAGE
-  EDUCATION
-  PAVEMENT MARKINGS
-  PAVING & MAINTENANCE
-  TRAFFIC CALMING
-  LIGHTING
-  PUBLIC REALM IMPROVEMENTS

EXAMPLE: SHORT CUT TO TRINITY BELLWOODS PARK

This unnamed laneway offers a short-cut from the residential areas from the north and east of Trinity Bellwoods Park. Using the laneway can help cyclists avoid having to cycle on Queen Street to get to the park.



OPPORTUNITY BY LANEWAY TYPE:

RESIDENTIAL ACCESS

In residential areas, laneways are common routes for people leaving and returning home, whether on foot, bike or car. If the City adopts a policy framework that supports laneway suites as of right, even more people will be living in laneways and using them as the primary routes to their homes.

Most residential laneways already function quite well as routes for cyclists leaving and returning to their homes. Drivers usually maintain lower speeds, and are mindful of other users in the laneway. Residential laneways are not used for garbage storage as often and tend to have less significant maintenance issues than busy commercial laneways. Delivery trucks are less of an issue as well.

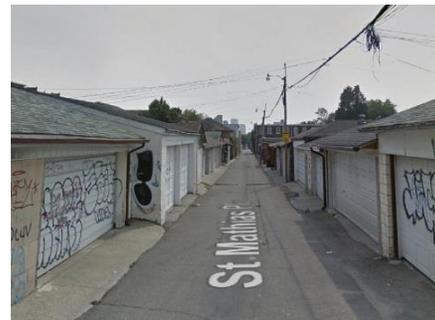
Some small improvements could help to increase the safety of residential laneways for cyclists and other users. These could include signage, speed bumps (with openings for cyclists), street painting, and fish-eye mirrors at tight corners. In addition, education about the shared function of the laneway could help to improve behaviour by all users and reduce potential collisions.

POSSIBLE LANEWAY IMPROVEMENTS

-  TRAFFIC CALMING
-  EDUCATION
-  SIGNAGE
-  OTHER SAFETY MEASURES (FISH-EYE MIRRORS)

EXAMPLE: RESIDENTIAL LANEWAY IN LITTLE PORTUGAL

This residential laneway is/can be used by cyclists when leaving and returning to their homes.



OPPORTUNITY BY LANEWAY TYPE:

CONSTRUCTION DETOUR

Construction is a common occurrence in Toronto. It often requires the closing of roads, intersections, and bike lanes, and the re-direction of vehicular traffic onto alternate roadways. Cyclists are heavily affected by this work - when bike lanes are closed for construction, cyclists can be forced to navigate dangerous construction conditions and seek unsafe alternatives (such as merging suddenly into traffic or streetcar tracks). Safe alternatives are needed to protect cyclists during construction.

Existing City processes and provincial guidance provide the basis for accommodating cyclists in and around temporary conditions in Toronto. City staff have developed Guiding Principles for Cycling Safety in Work Zones along with minor modifications to current City practices to ensure that the best conditions for cycling safety are met in these temporary conditions. However, space restrictions on downtown streets often still create challenging conditions for cyclists during construction.

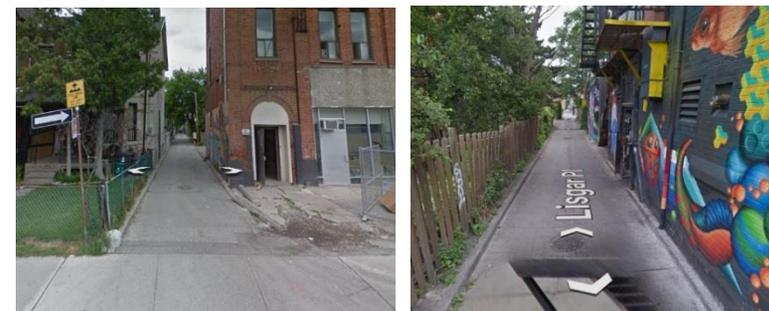
Laneways provide an opportunity to keep cyclists moving, while separating them from construction and traffic. These alternate routes could be created using a combination of signage, detour mapping, pavement markings and reduced traffic speed.

POSSIBLE LANEWAY IMPROVEMENTS

-  SIGNAGE
-  EDUCATION
-  OTHER SAFETY MEASURES (REDUCED TRAFFIC SPEED)

EXAMPLE: DETOUR FOR CONSTRUCTION ON QUEEN W (THEORETICAL)

If Queen Street W was under construction, cyclists could be re-routed through the laneway north of the construction.



OPPORTUNITY BY LANEWAY TYPE

COMMERCIAL BUSINESS ACCESS AND BIKE STORAGE

Laneways can provide short cuts to and from commercial businesses and restaurants, allowing cyclists to avoid busy streets and intersections. As part of this, businesses can open their back doors onto the laneway as secondary entrances. These secondary storefronts can provide businesses with unique opportunities to expand commercial or outdoor patio space, reach new clientele, and create unique experiences for their customers.

Many employees access their place of work through the back entrance in the laneway. Combined with other improvements, laneways can provide valuable outdoor space for employees.

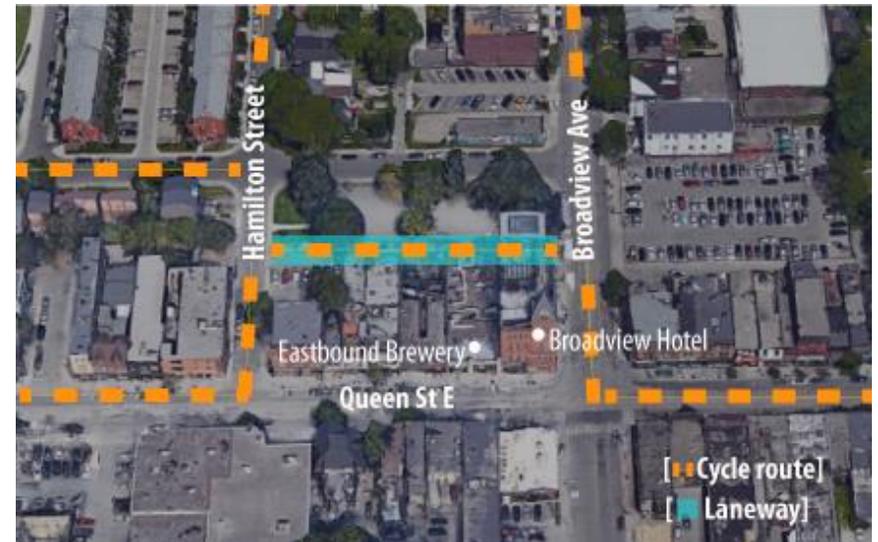
In commercial areas, laneways could also be used for bike storage. Finding bicycle parking on the street is often a challenge, especially in busy neighbourhoods or near popular destinations. New bike racks could be added behind local businesses in the laneway (as long as the bike storage does not encroach on the emergency access route).

POSSIBLE LANEWAY IMPROVEMENTS

-  PAVING & MAINTENANCE
-  LIGHTING
-  WASTE MANAGEMENT
-  PUBLIC REALM IMPROVEMENTS
-  CYCLING FACILITIES (BIKE RACKS)

EXAMPLE: LANEWAY BEHIND BROADVIEW HOTEL AND EASTBOUND BREWING COMPANY

The laneway behind the Broadview Hotel could become a new access point for customers and employees of the hotel and brewery. The brewery could also use the laneway for patio space. Bike parking could be added to the laneway.



IMPLEMENTATION AND NEXT STEPS

IMPLEMENTATION: HOW TO CREATE SHARED LANEWAYS FOR CYCLING

We have identified four ways that the opportunities described in this report can be achieved.

Demonstration projects

Demonstration projects could be used to test and validate the improvements described in this report, and build support for the ideas over the longer term. A demonstration project would require selection of a particular laneway in need of improvement, analysis and consultation with the local community and stakeholders. It could be funded through the City budget, through the Section 37 funds, by a private donor and/or through developer contributions. Several Councillors expressed interest in having a demonstration project in their community.

As development occurs

Typically, new infill developments pay little to no attention to their adjacent laneways and focus streetscaping and beautification efforts on the front or sides of the building. Developers whose properties abut laneways could incorporate the recommendations in this report and improve the laneway as they are re-developing the adjacent site.

Improved service delivery

The City of Toronto's operating budget is reviewed, debated, changed and approved every year. As the City evolves, funding is re-allocated towards different services based on the City's priorities and needs at the time. Allocating more operating funds towards laneway maintenance would help to improve the usability of laneways for cyclists and pedestrians.

Policy and operational changes

The City of Toronto has already begun implementing policy changes to support the improvement of laneways. The Complete Streets Guidelines were approved in 2017. The forthcoming update to urban design policies in the Official Plan are also expected to include policies that emphasize laneways as public spaces. Continued policy and operational changes within Transportation Services, City Planning, and Waste Management Services would help to support the on-going improvement of laneways for cyclists and pedestrians.



NEXT STEPS

The following are the next steps for the Laneways as Bikeways project:

Share, publicize and gather feedback on the report findings

We plan to share the report widely through the networks of our organizations to ensure that members of the public, the cycling community, other stakeholders and City staff are aware of the results of the research. Meetings with City staff could also provide an opportunity to discuss the findings in more detail and gather feedback on how to move the research forward.

Monitor 'laneway suites' process

Our team will continue to monitor the City's progress on the development of laneway suites policies, as it may increase the need for laneway improvements.

Design and implement a Demonstration Project

A demonstration project would be the best way to test and validate the opportunities described in this report. The following steps would be required:

- Secure funding to support project planning
- Build support for the demonstration project among City staff and local Councillors
- Secure implementation funding and project partners
- Select and assess the project laneway
- Consult the surrounding community
- Design improvements
- Build/implement improvements
- Monitor and report on the project's results

Develop an education campaign

We now understand that many people in Toronto cycle in laneways; however, there are no clear rules or guidelines for how to behave while in the space. An important next step is to conduct education and outreach to inform cyclists, pedestrians and motorists about how to behave safely in laneways. An education campaign could be developed to include workshops, communications and branding, and media outreach. A campaign could also include engagement with cycling groups, the City and other stakeholders to encourage inclusion of laneway-cycling safety tips in communication/educational materials about cycling.

Note: Execution of the above next steps is dependent on funding available to support our team in carrying out of key tasks.