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1164 St. Anthony Road, London, ON, N6H 2R1

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Councilor Steve Lehman
City of London, Ontario
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Dear Councilor Steve Lehman:

I am writing today in regard to my community and neighbourhood on St. Anthony Road. Recently, neighbours gathered to discuss the proposed paving of our road and the City's Complete Streets Mandate. I am a disability scholar and advocate, and also identify as a woman living with a lifelong disability. My research, teaching, advocacy and writing center on perspectives on disability and how individuals with disability navigate our systems and institutions. I have followed the sidewalk debate with interest, specifically the reactions, stories and worries from my fellow neighbours who also live with disability and/or impairment.

Our neighbourhood feels like a social, supportive, and inclusive community, and accessible for those of us who live with disability. I use the word feel, because accessibility is not only seen but has to feel inclusive in order to be effectively used. I was struck by why a sidewalk, as part of a Complete Street Mandate, didn't feel accessible to me within this neighbourhood, and I wanted to unpack this feeling for you in this letter. In the five years my husband and I have lived on St. Anthony Rd, I have never felt excluded or unsafe in this neighbourhood. My husband and I chose to build our accessible home on this street because the property sizes allowed for a one-story accessible living foundation/footprint, but also because of how quiet this neighbourhood is. We lived on a heavily traveled through-street before moving here, a street a little wider than St. Anthony Rd with sidewalks on both sides. I went for a walk/wheel every day with our dog but had to stay on one side of the road because I was afraid to be hit by a car at the two points where pedestrians could cross.

One of my neighbours living with disability mentioned recently that the ability to walk on St. Anthony Rd means *freedom*. The word freedom interests me from a theoretical perspective because it relates to independence. We live in a society where independence is automatically related to functioning and ability, autonomy, and self-sufficiency. However, when you live with a disability or impairment, independence also relates to the concepts of choice and control. These concepts do not only represent choice and control over our bodies and who gets to decide what happens to our bodies, but also how we interact with services, equipment, caring relationships and community. On St. Anthony Rd, freedom means the ability to walk/wheel side-by-side with neighbours along this road. Freedom means knowing that we are going to encounter more pedestrians than cars on the road. Freedom also means having the ability to choose where we walk depending on construction, weather, garbage days, or how our bodies feel and the types of mobility devices we use. This road means inclusion and belonging for me no matter my abilities.

Disability and accessibility represent complex concepts for me. As a disabled citizen, I often feel relegated to the edges. We have specific places for us to sit at. We have specific entrances and places within buildings where to use elevators and where to access washrooms and parking. I rarely get to use a space 'like everyone else'. So, when we have a street, like St. Anthony Rd, with little vehicle traffic and a strong social, supportive, and inclusive community, where everyone feels safe, and cars know to look for us, the idea of a sidewalk feels segregating. A sidewalk feels like the place where those of us with disabilities are supposed to be in order to be 'safe' and others get to choose where they walk. In that sense, this change **looks** safe and meets accessibility standards but **feels** inaccessible because it threatens our segregation from this inclusive community we feel we belong to and within. I particularly felt this when I reflected on how I might use a sidewalk. My first thought was "Will I have to use the sidewalk then or can I still use the road?". I also thought about whether I could walk side-by-side with neighbours who also use mobility devices. Currently we have the freedom to do this. St. Anthony Rd has not been a dangerous street and does not connect to any infrastructure. Thus, a sidewalk for safety and accessibility feels like a drastic change.

We have something special on this little road that feels like a park and a livable street in the middle of a large city. I grew up in Europe, with old inner cities and tiny roads that cannot be widened for sidewalks. For decades, Europe has implemented livable streets within its cities. These streets are called "Woonerfs" (a "home zone") that create a space where pedestrians, cars, and bicycles co-exist with each other. They are spaces where neighbourhood cultures make streets safer by allowing residents to reclaim their streets. Cars slow down and are guests, rather than dominant, on the road. These home zones apply not only to new builds, but also to retrofitted streets where communities want to give children a place to play, where pedestrians have the right of way, and residents are provided with a place to be active, increase community interaction and quality of life. They are considered safe, accessible, inclusive, and vital parts of the community.

Would the city be interested in **shaping** this space for us? I believe in the importance of considering place and space in addition to safety and accessibility. In a neighbourhood where everyone feels like they belong, a neighbourhood that has potential to be a space where neighbours coexist, whether they walk, wheel, play, cycle, or drive, a sidewalk will likely not add to safety and accessibility. The sidewalk also will not connect to any stores, coffee shops, churches or schools. People who use St. Anthony Rd enjoy the outdoors and have the ability to travel the 4 roads that make up our community. This social community thrives on this neighbourhood meeting each other on this very road. Perhaps this council could consider further shaping St. Anthony Rd into an inclusive space that is not divided by a vertical sidewalk through one section of the community. Perhaps the city could create a home zone that will further foster the usability, accessibility, inclusion, safety, and community we have already created here, all year round, in this beautiful quiet space in the middle of the city of London, ON.

Sincerely,

