Taking it to the streets

Cities around the world are opening streets — that is, closing them to most car traffic — in order to create room for people to walk, cycle, and simply delight in nature responsibly.

By Renée Loth Contributor, Updated May 8, 2020, 2 hours ago

Last Sunday, as the cherry trees blossomed and temperatures reached the 70s, the state Department of Conservation and Recreation shut down Riverbend Park, the 1-mile stretch of Memorial Drive that has been open to pedestrians on Sundays from May to November since the 1970s. Amid the coronavirus pandemic, the risk of creating a magnet
for crowds unable to maintain a safe distance was just too great. Through its Twitter feed, the agency tried to steer the public to lesser-known parkways it has closed to traffic, such as Greenough Boulevard in Watertown and Francis Parkman Drive in Jamaica Plain. But it was still forced to temporarily close parking lots and limit visitors to its properties, from the Blue Hills to Walden Pond.

The delicate balancing act between access to the outdoors and public health and safety is only going to get more difficult as warm weather arrives in earnest. Even under stay-at-home orders, people still require some exercise in the fresh air, crucial for mental and physical health. Essential workers who may not feel comfortable taking public transportation also need alternative commutes to their jobs. Where can all those people go?

As the parks and riverfronts grow more congested, officials should look to the largest area of public space in virtually every city: the streets.
Cities around the world are opening streets — that is, closing them to most vehicle traffic — in order to create room for people to walk, cycle, and simply delight in nature responsibly. Minneapolis, Denver, and San Francisco have closed select streets to through traffic; Oakland, Calif., plans to modify 74 miles of streets. Last week, after a fitful start, Mayor Bill De Blasio of New York committed to a phased opening of 100 miles of streets. Other cities, though, are wary of creating new hot spots — in both the medical and social sense of the term. Mayor Eric Garcetti of Los Angeles nixed one open-streets proposal last week, and Chicago shut down its popular Riverwalk until at least May 31.

In Boston, officials are looking for ways to repurpose the streets without creating a “festival” atmosphere that would be difficult to police. “We are actively exploring how to reuse the asphalt in our city,” said Chris Osgood, chief of streets for the City of Boston. Working with the city public health department and others, Osgood’s team is trying to think strategically about traffic restrictions in discrete areas: Main Street shopping districts, where street openings may also help small businesses; around bus stops, where commuters need to gather; adjacent to parks, where a reclaimed parking lane can absorb the spillover of visitors. It’s a good, thoughtful start, but it may not be enough.
In a way, the dilemma officials face is a straightforward matter of supply and demand: The demand for open space is currently higher than the supply, with predictable results of crowding; while the demand for streets to accommodate cars is low. According to Streetlight Data, the number of vehicle-miles traveled in Suffolk County is down 75 percent from January. You have to wonder why Memorial Drive can’t afford to lose one lane of traffic — and not just on Sundays — if so few are using it. Concentrating cars, instead of people, would also help lower speeds on the roadways, which have been up dangerously since March.

The need is even more acute in communities hardest hit by the coronavirus. Boston is fortunate to be among the few US cities with a park located within a 10-minute walk of every resident. But the quality of neighborhood parks is uneven. And in Chelsea, the community at the epicenter of the state’s COVID-19 cases, only 3 percent of city land is set aside for recreation.

Offering the public fewer options for a walk outdoors creates a scarcity mentality: People flock to the limited places available. Logically, the answer to overcrowding is to flood the zone with many more opportunities so the public can be widely dispersed. In the bargain, people will begin to see the world again not just through a lens of fear but of joy. And uplifted spirits are more resilient — more willing to carry on.

Like the rest of society’s tentative emergence, opening the streets has to be done with great care, with now-familiar safety protocols — wearing masks and maintaining a distance of at least 6 feet — strictly observed. But the glories of May in New England are already enticing people outdoors. They need to be given room to breathe.

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