

<http://www.insidetoronto.com/news/local/article/850765--the-car-is-not-an-option-expert-says>

## **The car is not an option, expert says Advisor criticizes political inaction on creating liveable cities at town hall**

TIM FORAN  
July 22, 2010

'When a person on a \$40 bike is as important as someone in a \$40,000 car, then things start to change' - Gil Peñalosa

Toronto's decision to remove a playground from R.V Burgess Park, which serves the 30,000 strong immigrant neighbourhood of Thorncliffe Park with no plans to replace it for a decade is a failure of the city's bureaucracy and political structure, argued Gil Peñalosa during a recent presentation at Valley Park Middle School.

Peñalosa, the executive director of the liveable city advocacy organization 8-80 Cities, pointed out the city removed the playground from Burgess Park in the middle years of this decade. The city's capital plan envisions replacing it in 2015.

That time period covers essentially a child's entire youth, said Peñalosa.

He added the city can't complain it doesn't have the cash at the same time as it's unveiling plans for a multi-storey, multiple-rink arena in the Portlands that will cost tens of millions of dollars.

"We really got to check what are our priorities," he said. "It's a matter of politics."



*Gil Peñalosa, a former bureaucrat in Bogota, Colombia, says Toronto is far behind other international cities in creating liveable cities that incorporate adequate bike lanes.*

He said not creating liveable communities with useful and safe parks and public spaces is an impetus for people to leave a community when they have more money, resulting in communities dominated by particular economic classes.

"If I can't get a playground for 10 years, whenever I get the chance, I'm going to move somewhere else," he said.

Peñalosa said the fact Thorncliffe residents, many of whom aren't Canadian citizens and can't vote, might not have political clout shouldn't matter but he said it does.

He recalled cycling home recently through a park and running into a well-known city councillor, whom he did not name. He said he mentioned he would be making a presentation in Thorncliffe and the councillor pointed out that Leaside, across the railway from Thorncliffe, has residents that can and do vote and therefore carry more sway with the city. Peñalosa suggested it's a drawback to the city's ward political system.

"I utterly reject the suggestion that that has a bearing on the way policy is developed in the city's parks and recreation department or in my own mind," responded Don Valley West Councillor John Parker, who represents both communities, in an interview this week. "When I serve Thorncliffe, I don't consider whether someone is a citizen or not a citizen, or a voter or not a voter, or frankly whether they're a supporter of mine or not a supporter of mine.

"The suggestion that there's an inordinate weight brought to bear by one group over another for reasons unrelated to good policy criteria is a complete fabrication."

Parker did agree, however, with Peñalosa's criticism of the city for removing the Burgess Park playground and not replacing it.

"It's not even a matter of priorities, someone just has to give their head a shake," he said, pointing out the decision took place before he was elected in 2006. "The idea of removing playground equipment from a community like Thorncliffe with no plan to replace it immediately was close to criminal."

However, he said the record shows resources haven't been directed in favour of Leaside but rather the opposite. He said Leaside has had no major parks and recreation capital funds directed its way and a plan to develop a second ice pad at the local arena hasn't yet found its way into the city's 10-year capital budget. Meanwhile, he said he managed to secure stimulus funding to improve both Burgess Park and Leaside Park, which is actually in Thorncliffe despite its name.

The Mirror confirmed Parker's lobbying efforts. Both parks were among the three, along with nearby Nesbitt Park, that received federal infrastructure stimulus fund (ISF) and city dollars for general improvements, according to government documents. That will result in improved trails and new playground equipment for Leaside Park and improvements to Burgess Park, with Leaside Park's existing junior playground equipment being moved to Burgess Park.

Thorncliffe was apparently fortunate to receive the ISF funds because it wouldn't have qualified for the main 'RInC/REC' recreational stimulus funding envelope, under which most city recreation projects received provincial and federal stimulus dollars.

Mike Schreiner, Toronto's manager of capital projects for Parks, Forestry and Recreation, said the city submitted 51 playground enhancement projects for RInC/REC funding, essentially all the ones on the 2010-2013 docket. As playground projects for Leaside and Burgess Parks weren't scheduled until 2015, they didn't make the submissions list, he said. In the end, the two upper governments approved 24 of the projects.

Among the list was Lessard Park, located near the Old Mill just north of Bloor West Village, and which already had existing though below safety standard equipment. Asked why such a location would be a higher priority than a park with no equipment at all, Schreiner said the list of priorities was established by department directors in the city's four districts (north, south, east, west) in 2006. For that year's capital budget, each director submitted a list of 40 playground enhancements, prioritized in order, he explained. Since then, the city attempts to build approximately 12 new playgrounds a year, three in each district, according to that priority list.

The aim is for each district to receive "an equal share of the pot of money that council approves," said Schreiner, adding the list of new playground projects grows each year.

"In the case of R.V. Burgess (Park), I know Councillor Parker has been working with the directors and senior management trying to find a way to get a additional funding to augment the junior (playground) that's being moved into R.V. Burgess and put in the senior playground next year," he added.

A former bureaucrat famed for transforming the city of Bogota, Colombia through the construction of hundreds of kilometres of bikeways and parks as well as removing cars from almost 100 kilometres of city streets on Sundays has sharply criticized both Toronto's inaction on developing a liveable city and the pro-car tenor of the current mayoral debate.

According to police, a pedestrian is hit every six hours in the Toronto area, Gil Peñalosa, the executive director of the Toronto-based advocacy group 8-80 Cities, said during a recent presentation at Valley Park Middle School, located at the border of the Flemington Park and Thorncliffe Park communities.

"And nobody cares," said Peñalosa. "Has anybody heard anything from any of the candidates running for mayor about making the city safer for pedestrians?"

Peñalosa added Torontonians seem not only inured to pedestrian fatalities, but many seem to justify them as the fault of pedestrians for using an iPod or a phone.

"What? Somebody can be killed because they were listening to music on the iPod?" he asked incredulously. "That doesn't make any sense."

During a question and answer period following his presentation, Penalosa also criticized those candidates running for office in this fall's Toronto election who pander to the populace by suggesting the solution to traffic woes is more and bigger roads, something he said 50 years of North American experience has shown always results in more, not less, congestion.

"Look, the honest answer is the car is not an option," said Peñalosa, who as the former commissioner of parks, sport and recreation in Bogota opened 91 kilometres of car-free city roads on Sundays, an event now known as the Ciclovía and used by 1.5 million people weekly to walk, run, skate and bike.

"The only solution is public transit and walking and cycling," he said. "The car has a role to play...but we can't expect everybody to get everywhere by car."

The slow implementation of active transportation options in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) is neither due to technical reasons nor a lack of money, argued Peñalosa. He pointed out other crowded cities manage to construct on-road separated bike paths in weeks, not years. And Toronto is not short of cash - he noted Bogota created 280 kilometres of bikeways in three years though its residents have a tenth of the per capita income as Torontonians. He also pointed out the subway extension to Vaughan, into what is now a low density area between Steeles Avenue and Highway 7, will cost \$2.6 billion.

"What's it going to solve?," Peñalosa asked rhetorically. "Nothing, nothing."

He said governments could have created a bus rapid transit system along the same route and have money left over for protected bikeways all across Ontario.

What Toronto needs to catch up to cities like Copenhagen, Amsterdam and New York is leadership, political will, and doers in the public sector, he said.

"(Bureaucrats) need to be reminded they're paid to get things done, not to list reasons why (something) is not possible," he said.

He suggested both groups have a responsibility to represent all citizens, including the one-third of people - youth and seniors - who don't drive.

"It's almost like a human right, it's like the right to mobility," he said.

The name 8-80 Cities ([www.8-80cities.org](http://www.8-80cities.org)), formerly called Walk and Bike for Life, is a reminder to city builders to design a world that's accessible and safe to the children and the aged, he said.

At least one indicator shows Toronto isn't there, he said. Women, due to concerns about safety, make up only 20 per cent of the cyclists in Toronto, a city which uses paint rather than infrastructure to separate its bike lanes, said Peñalosa. In comparison, cyclists in Copenhagen are 55 per cent female, a figure closer to the population norm.

The Danish city provides an apt comparison for Toronto, said Peñalosa, because of its similar climate and the fear its denizens had of carving out road space for pedestrians and cyclists 40 years ago. At that time, residents argued creating pedestrian-only streets or constructing separated bike paths would be impossible and futile because the car was the dominant mode of transportation, such routes would only be

used in the spring and summer, and the culture of walking and congregating in public places was part of the Italian rather than the Danish culture.

"Let me tell you, now the Danish are more Italian than the Italians," said Peñalosa. "They love their public spaces."

Bicycling has doubled in Copenhagen, a richer and more educated city than Toronto, since 1990 and now 38 per cent of trips are made by bike with a goal of reaching 50 per cent by 2015, he said. Seventy per cent of those cyclists continue to bike in the snow, and more than 60 per cent of cyclists do it because it's easy, fast and convenient, he said. Only one per cent cite environmental reasons.

"A politician in Toronto said, 'Traffic is terrible because of the cyclists,'" recalled Peñalosa, after which he showed a video of a bikeway in Copenhagen being used by thousands of cyclists moving without interruption. "Can you imagine if each one of these cyclists was using one car? No, traffic is terrible because there's not enough cyclists."

Peñalosa said such change is never easy and every community finds reasons why it's not possible in their area.

"Every community is different, every community is unique," he said. "Nevertheless, it's about adapting and improving."

"Unfortunately, we don't have 40 years, we need to develop a sense of urgency... We're moving at the speed of a turtle."

Thorncliffe and Flemingdon, areas of large residential towers populated by tens of thousands of new Canadians, might also face cultural challenges.

"There is no predominance of bike culture from where they're coming from," explained Jehad Aliweiwi, executive director of the multi-services non-profit Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office, referring to the South Asian, Afghani, and Arabic-speaking newcomers.

However, whether by default or design, he said the horseshoe-shaped community of Thorncliffe allows parents to see their children walk to the junior school - North America's largest elementary with 1,800 kids and 700 more spaces coming - and almost all people walk to the adjacent mall, the East York Town Centre.

"So people are walking and we're encouraging them," he said. However, his office, which invited Peñalosa to speak, is also encouraging residents to take up cycling, especially in the abundant green environs of the Don River valley beside the community. So far, they're having more luck getting the kids, first generation Canadians, to pedal.

That's the experience of Thorncliffe resident, Elizabeth Muchogo, a Kenyan immigrant who took in Peñalosa's presentation with her six-year-old son, Eric. He cycled, she walked.

"I've never cycled in my life," she said, explaining it's dangerous to do so in Kenyan cities.

However, she is hopeful it becomes more a part of the culture in Toronto as it is in Copenhagen. Her younger sister lives in that city, and is only now herself learning to cycle.

Muchogo said her sister's husband, a lawyer, rides his bike every day and has never learned to drive.

"You won't find a professor or a lawyer from my country cycling," she said.

That's an attitude that must change, Peñalosa said during his presentation.

Providing infrastructure for active transportation, including physically separated bike lanes, is a message to the world that Canada is a truly egalitarian society.

"When a person on a \$40 bike is as important as someone in a \$40,000 car, then things start to change."