

New York City transportation guru brings urban renewal message to Ottawa



[Matthew Pearson, Ottawa Citizen](#)

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“These kinds of changes are not just green, granola, nice things to have,” Janette Sadik-Khan says “They’re actually vital economic development strategies.”

The transportation czar who oversaw the dynamic renewal of New York City’s streets and public spaces is coming to Ottawa next week to spread her message about the importance of building safer, more walkable and bike-friendly roads.

But what Janette Sadik-Khan might discover Wednesday is that Ottawa already has or is soon poised to embrace many of the strategies outlined in her so-called “handbook for an urban revolution.”

Segregated bike lanes protected by a row of parked cars? Check. Special bus-only lanes for rapid transit? Check. On-street parking spaces replaced by micro patios and parks? Check.

Bike racks designed by artists? Energy-efficient LED streetlights? Closing some roads to cars on summer weekends? Check, check, check.

In fact, one of the only initiatives that has been a huge success in New York but has struggled to get its bearings here is a bike-sharing program.

“You can build on those successes,” Sadik-Khan said in an interview. “It’s not just about one bike lane or pedestrianizing part of a downtown. It’s about a whole walkable, safe and economically-viable network.”

Appointed New York City’s transportation commissioner by former mayor Michael Bloomberg, Sadik-Khan spent six years reimagining the streets of her hometown with an eye to making them safer, more inviting for pedestrians and cyclists, with less congestion and less patience for an outdated, status-quo approach to street design that prioritized cars over everyone else.

Her department created 400 miles (650 kilometres) of bike lanes, seven rapid transit busways and dozens of pedestrian plazas, including one at Times Square, which more than 350,000 people stroll through every day. It was all done without bulldozing a single building or neighbourhood, she says. And it was done quickly and cheaply, often with green paint, planters, lights and surplus stone from bridge projects.

In a nod to New York's most famous sons, Frank Sinatra and Jay-Z, Sadik-Khan quips in her new book, *Streetfight*: "If you can remake it here, you can remake it anywhere."

But what's happened there is also spreading to cities all across North America, from Chicago to Los Angeles. And even to Ottawa, despite being a fraction of the size of those other urban centres.

"Ottawa punches above its weight," said Michael Mizzi, acting general manager of the city's planning and growth management department, which is also responsible for long-term transportation planning.

"Her thinking is in sync with what we're doing already."

City planners — and politicians — have embraced the importance of walkability and bike lanes when designing streets, he says.

He points to the complete-streets framework, a city policy that requires all new and reconstructed roads to be designed and maintained with all road users in mind in an effort to create safe, comfortable and convenient travel and access for users of all ages, regardless of whether they are driving a car, riding a bike, walking or taking the bus.

"It's a rethinking of the way we do streets," Mizzi said.

Examples of roads in Ottawa that incorporate complete street elements include Churchill Avenue, Leikin Drive, Longfields Drive and River Road. Main Street will be a complete street once the current reconstruction project is finished in 2017.

Sadik-Khan's visit to Ottawa will include a private meeting with Mizzi and staff from his department, as well as a bike tour, walkabout in the ByWard Market and keynote speech at Lansdowne Park.

To planners, Sadik-Khan says she'll talk about how world-class cities are being designed differently today, with a view from the street as opposed to a view from behind a dashboard. She'll encourage them to try something new, even on a short-term basis, to see what works and to change the public's expectation of what streets are and who they're for.

And she'll urge them to collect some data to overcome what she called "management by anecdote" — relying, for example, not on a driver's personal story about how a particular road change slowed them down but, as was the case in New York, the GPS readings from 13,000 yellow cabs that showed traffic moves better now.

"These kinds of changes are not just green, granola, nice things to have," she said. "They're actually vital economic development strategies."

In New York, where gridlock has become mythologized in television and film, traffic now moves four per cent faster than it did before Sadik-Khan's interventions.

But congestion was far from her guiding motivation. She wanted to save lives.

New York City streets, in the early 1990s, were “decrepit,” yet still she commuted from her apartment in the West Village to downtown on the back of a bike steered by her husband. There weren’t a lot of bikes on city streets in those days and only a handful of bike lanes.

Yet, in 1990, 20 cyclists were among the 701 people who died in traffic crashes. One pedestrian died every day.

By 2013, those numbers dropped sharply. There were 293 traffic fatalities that year, including drivers and their passengers. Of those, 177 were people on foot.

Sadik-Khan made safety the transportation department’s priority, setting — for the first time ever — an actual target of reducing traffic fatalities by half, to 135, by 2030.

A subsequent pledge by New York’s current mayor Bill de Blasio seeks to eliminate traffic fatalities entirely, as part of the Vision Zero movement. The Swedish initiative sees a city committed to working toward zero motor vehicle fatalities within 10 years.

Ottawa hasn’t made such a declaration, but Mizzi called the notion of zero fatalities a “desirable want.” In 2014, there were 29 traffic-related deaths in Ottawa, including nine pedestrians and two cyclists.

But pedestrians, cyclists and cars will continue to share the city’s 6,000 kilometres of road and that increases the risk of potential conflict, Mizzi said.

“Not every street can have segregated bikeways, not every street is going to have perfect crosswalks. Accidents happen. Is safety our paramount goal? Absolutely,” he said.

Urban-minded folks have long wanted to bring Sadik-Khan to Ottawa. Many were captivated by a TED Talk she gave in 2013, viewed nearly 900,000 times since.

“There’s clearly a massive appetite,” said Graham Saul, executive director of Ecology Ottawa, the main sponsor of Sadik-Khan’s visit. The group initially booked the Horticulture Building at Lansdowne Park but has since moved the event to the larger Aberdeen Pavilion to accommodate the 1,700 people who have RSVP’d to the event, which is free.

“At the heart of it, she’s responded to our collective desire for great places and community ... People like the idea of their streets being thought of as places and not just thoroughfares for cars,” Saul said.

He’s pleased to see the city take a new, holistic approach to street design and construction, but wants things to happen faster. Ottawa’s cycling and pedestrian plans, for example, both outline a long list of infrastructure projects, but spread them out over 15 years. The city should accelerate that timeline, especially if there’s an opportunity to tap into federal or provincial infrastructure cash, Saul said.

The city must also revitalize the ByWard Market and make it a “world-class public space,” he said.

Sadik-Khan hasn't been to Ottawa before and admitted it's not on her radar the way other Canadian cities are.

She'll be keeping a close eye on the streets here, in particular, how lively and full of people they are, as that's an indication to her of how well the streets are working.

And, as she says in her book, a city's streets must work if the city itself is to work.

“Regardless of where you live or how you get around or how much you may detest a bike lane, bus lane or plaza, streets matter. They are the mortar that holds most of the world's population together. They must be designed to encourage street life, economy and culture.”