

# Ottawa 'walkability' audits find roadblocks for seniors, others



[Don Butler, Ottawa Citizen](#)

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Broken sidewalks, unplowed pathways in winter, speeding traffic and unsafe crossings.

Volunteers conducting “age-friendly walkability audits” of three Ottawa neighbourhoods encountered all those hazards and more, says a report released Thursday.

The nine audits, done in the winter, spring and fall of 2014-15 by the Council on Aging of Ottawa’s pedestrian safety committee, examined how easily seniors and other vulnerable pedestrians could navigate streets and pathways in the Glebe and Hintonburg in Ottawa and Beaverbrook in Kanata.

They found that all three neighbourhoods had many broken, cracked and dangerous sidewalks.

“Safety and a fear of falling was an overarching concern of audit participants across neighbourhoods and seasons due to poor upkeep of sidewalks and pathways,” the report says.

Another common safety issue was the inadequacy of curb cuts at numerous intersections. Dealing with that, the report says, “should be a priority in order to foster accessibility in a more age-friendly city.”

Many audit participants spoke of sidewalks ending abruptly or places of interest that were inaccessible “for those who are not agile.”

Winter brought many challenges, the report says, most notably the lack of proper plowing. “Often pathways were not cleared at all, whereas at times, re-plowing walkways created uneven, icy patches, making it quite unsafe and inaccessible for all pedestrians, especially older adults.”

At intersections, large snow piles obstructed views, making it hard for pedestrians to see.

As part of the project, the pedestrian safety committee designed a simple five-question questionnaire, to be used by older adult volunteers known as “snow moles” to assess the accessibility of sidewalks, streets and bus stops following heavy snowfalls or freezing rain.

Though there was a low take-up of the questionnaire during the survey, the report says the committee believes such a tool would be useful as a quick way to audit walking conditions after severe winter weather.

Speeding traffic was a recurring complaint, particularly on narrow bridges and when pedestrians didn't feel safely separated from vehicles. One audit participant in Hintonburg reported being clipped by vehicle mirrors while walking along Scott Street with a stroller.

The audits found many instances where there were large gaps between safe crossing points. "This was particularly dangerous in construction areas, where pedestrians had no safe place to cross but were forced to do so anyway," the report says.

As well, older adults and those using walkers or wheelchairs need more time to cross the road than allowed by signals at some intersections, it observes.

Report recommends adopting a transportation strategy that gives priority to pedestrians, and especially to seniors and others who may have trouble navigating streets. Wayne Cuddington

In general, the audits found that age-friendly infrastructure for pedestrians was lacking.

One example is the installation of audible signals to help seniors and the visually impaired safely cross roads. While those exist at main intersections in the Glebe and Hintonburg, the report says, participants didn't know they had to depress the button for at least three seconds to activate the signal.

Open and accessible toilets and drinking fountains were rare, and more benches and bus shelters with seats were needed, the report says.

The report recommends followup on the specific problems identified in the audits and urges adoption of an age-friendly "feet first" approach to transportation and public space that gives priority to pedestrians first and drivers of motor vehicles last.

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## **BY THE NUMBERS**

**116,600:** Number of Ottawa residents 65 and older in 2011

**250,000:** Projected number of seniors by 2031

**33:** Percentage of Canadians over 65 with a disability

**81:** Percentage of people with disabilities using some kind of assistive device

**43:** Percentage of pedestrian deaths in Canada involving people 56 and older between 2000 and 2010

**10:** Percentage of those involved in pedestrian fatalities in Ontario in 2010 using canes, walkers, crutches or wheelchairs.