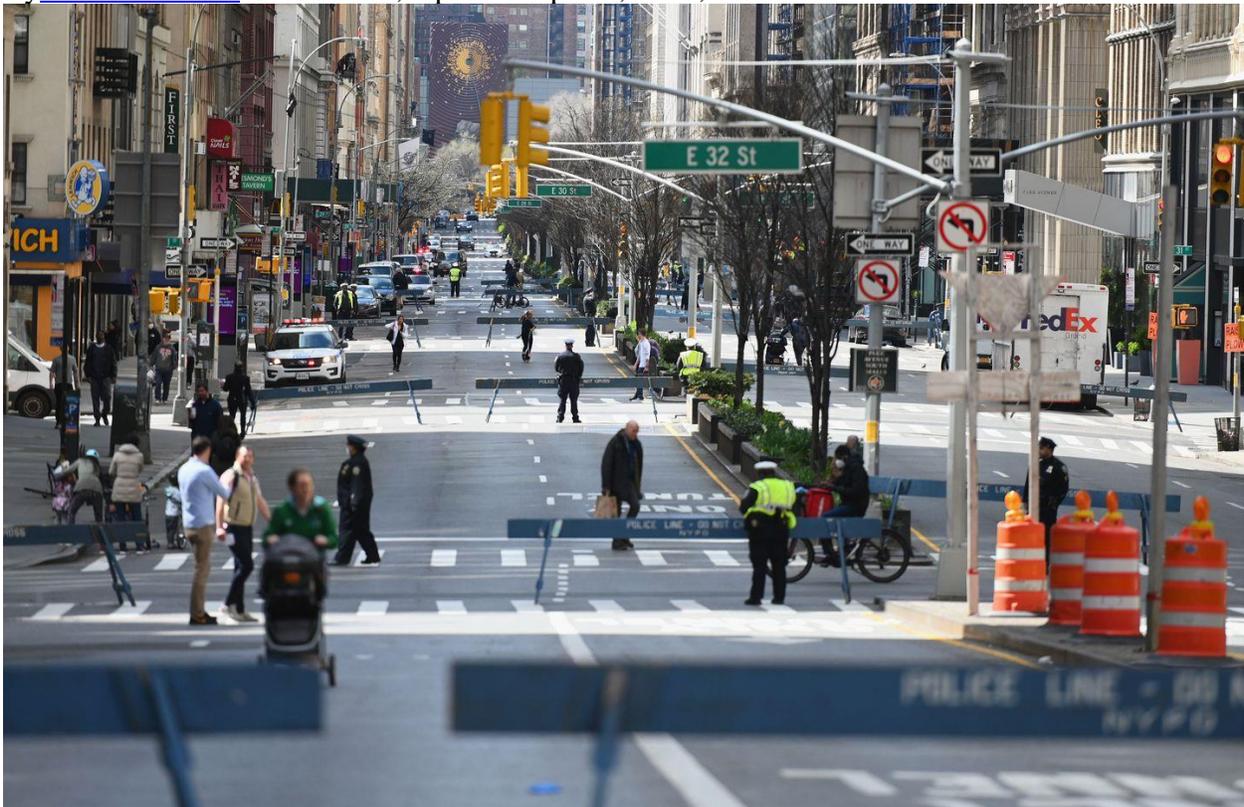


The Boston Globe

Share the road: should cities close streets to make more room for walkers, runners?

By [Adam Vaccaro](#) Globe Staff, Updated April 9, 2020, 8:10 a.m.



New York City experimented with closing down some streets, but abandoned the idea because it required too much police presence. ANGELA WEISS/AFP via Getty Images

Never has a neighborhood stroll felt so dangerous. In the era of social distancing, should you cross the street when a jogger comes your way? How do you maintain a social distance of 6 feet when many sidewalks are barely that?

Or, with so few cars on the roads these days, should cities and towns turn over a few streets to people out and walking and just looking to get some fresh air safely?

Several cities across the country have done so, most prominently, the Twin Cities and Denver, which have either closed a part or all of entire streets to auto traffic to allow people to stretch their legs without heading to a crowded park.

But with the coronavirus pandemic expected to crest in the coming days, officials in Greater Boston communities have been reluctant to implement similar proposals. Though some measures began taking form this week, they've grated against concerns that establishing more open space will only draw more people outside and in close proximity at precisely the time we all should be avoiding each other.

Even some advocates who in normal times are aggressively supportive of more space for walking and cycling are sympathetic to this point.

"When a community is explicitly trying to flatten the curve, creating spaces for mingling is not the right approach," said Stacy Thompson, director of the Livable Streets Alliance. "Opening a street and then requiring a police officer monitor . . . right now, that's just not where municipalities should put their resources."

New York tried it with a few blocks of pedestrian-only streets in recent weeks, but shut the program down because Mayor Bill DeBlasio believed they required too much police enforcement.

Closer to home, the Cambridge City Council on Monday tabled a proposal to close some streets as city staff raised concerns [that it would lead to more crowded areas](#).

And Brookline's select board similarly put off proposals to close entire streets for recreational use, arguing that residents should stay at home as much as possible.

"This is a horrible time to do anything to encourage people to get out," chair Bernard Greene said in a video conference meeting Tuesday. "This is the absolute worst time."

But in an acknowledgment that sidewalks in some areas are already too crowded, the Brookline board backed a proposal to use traffic cones to create walking lanes on some streets where there already is heavy pedestrian traffic, in some cases at the expense of on-street parking.

Areas that will soon get more space include Coolidge Corner, where mask-clad grocery shoppers stand in line to enter Trader Joe's and restaurants are handling takeout orders, and Longwood Avenue, a major commuting route for medical professionals who walk or bike.



Customers lined up outside the Trader Joe's grocery store in Coolidge Corner, which limits the number of people inside. Lane Turner/Globe Staff

The measure was meant to thread a needle: not encouraging more outdoor activity while making more space for pedestrians in already busy areas. Even that proved somewhat contentious, narrowly passing the select board 3-2, and with the condition that the added space should only be expected to serve essential purposes like buying groceries. Brookline's transportation board gave final approval to the measure, which is expected to be implemented soon.

In Boston, Mayor Martin J. Walsh has not taken up any proposals to change streets. But Chris Osgood, the city's chief of streets, said it is "open to exploring" closing some roads around parks that are growing crowded. He emphasized a similar point as Brookline officials: "In this work, our focus is not to create a new destination, but to ensure that public health guidance is being well followed" by creating more space.

The state's Department of Conservation and Recreation took that kind of step Friday, [announcing it would close parts of three parkways](#) to auto traffic to make more room for pedestrians and cyclists over the weekend and "aid in the reduction of large concentrations of people on adjacent sidewalks and paths." That will cumulatively open up about 1.5 miles on the three parkways, which are: William J. Day Boulevard in South Boston, Francis Parkman Drive in Jamaica Plain, and Greenough Boulevard in Watertown.

DCR has taken other action to increase social distancing at its parks, like [instituting one-way travel on paths at Walden Pond](#). To discourage crowds, the agency has also eliminated parking at many beach locations, and said it will soon begin reducing parking at other state parks.

Elsewhere, such as in Providence, officials are closing parks and trails [because of reports of crowding and group events](#).

Boston City Councilor Matt O'Malley, who has pushed for turning the paths around Jamaica Pond into one-way circuits, clockwise, said park-goers must "take social distancing seriously."

If not, "it could very well cause a closure of these parks. Nobody wants to see that," O'Malley said.

Some advocates think there may eventually be a need for closed streets to provide more recreational areas — especially as the weather turns nicer.

"It's impossible to expect people to stay indoors for months at a time," said Julia Wallerice, who leads the Boston office of the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy. "All of it needs to be planned in a way that not just encourages but maybe requires safe physical distance, so we don't feel like we're bandits in the night for taking our kids for a walk."

And what about those walkers and joggers passing each other out on less-traveled residential streets, unlikely to see much direct action from the government? Thompson, at Livable Streets, said most passersby will feel their best move is to weave briefly into the road. She said municipal leaders should encourage motorists to drive no faster than 15 miles an hour on residential streets during the pandemic, to ensure this is relatively safe.

"The last thing emergency rooms need right now is for a crash victim to show up," she said.