

Center for City Park Excellence



Proceed Without Caution *City parks are closing their roads to cars.*

Is a constant stream of automobile traffic appropriate in a city park? Or should we follow the lead of Frederick Law Olmsted in this matter? Writing in the 1850s, Olmsted noted that crowded thoroughfares have “nothing in common with the park proper, but every thing at variance with those agreeable sentiments which we should wish the park to inspire.”

Cities from Baltimore to San Francisco are increasingly in agreement with the father of landscape architecture. Park agencies are closing the roads to cars, either permanently or periodically, to improve their parks’ environment and to help citizens enhance their physical and mental health. It turns out that road closures save money and increase safety, too.

Of the 10,000 or more miles of urban park roads in the U.S., the vast majority are still devoted primarily to automobiles. But a survey of big cities by the Center for City Park Excellence in 2007 found that at least 22 park drives, totaling more than 40 miles, have been closed to cars either all or part of the time.

The most notable are the loop drives in New York City’s Central Park and Prospect Park as well as the former three-mile drive in Atlanta’s Piedmont Park. Other road segments have been gated in Baltimore, Denver, and San Antonio. And weekend closures occur regularly in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park and Washington, D.C.’s Rock Creek and East Potomac parks.

Banning cars is controversial because it stirs up emotions that touch people’s core values—freedom to drive anywhere versus freedom to get away from the rat race. And the debate cascades into every nook and cranny. What about the rights of the handicapped? Will there be traffic spillover into neighborhoods? Do cars bring more danger or more safety? Is park enjoyment by foot more legitimate than the pleasure received by looking through a windshield? Which is more deleterious to the environment, urban stop-and-go exhaust or the continuous emission on a park road? As with many other city park controversies, the one over cars usually takes place in a vacuum—with few facts and a lot of personal opinions, individual anecdotes, and unsubstantiated assumptions.

The single most significant—and unexpected—fact is that an automobile ban increases rather than decreases the number of persons using a park. A study of Golden

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*The Trust for Public Land
conserves land for people to enjoy
as parks, gardens, and other natural places,
ensuring livable communities
for generations to come.*

Gate Park conducted in 2006 by the city of San Francisco showed a 116 percent increase in park visitors on Sundays (when John F. Kennedy Drive is closed to cars) than on Saturdays (when the roadway is not restricted). “Families and people of all ages enjoy the park for what it was intended to be: a true oasis from the city,” says Leah Shahum of the San Francisco Bike Coalition.

While automobiles bring people to the parks, they also push them away. In contrast, car-free, hard-surface spaces can feature an astonishing number of activities: lovers strolling, children biking, roller skaters twirling, parents pushing baby strollers, seniors power-walking, runners marathon-training, girls hula-hooping, jugglers juggling, dogs barking and sniffing. The bigger and more diverse the city, the more unusual the activities. There have been reports of pack-carrying llamas, parades of drummers, racing unicyclists, and more.

Fewer cars can mean less crime. Atlanta’s Piedmont Park, once a spot frequented by prostitutes and drug dealers, has attracted nearly three million visitors a year since its three-mile road was closed in 1983, and it became much safer and more attractive in the process.

Auto-oriented San Antonio, Texas, had the same experience when park officials banned cars on a one-mile roadway section in Brackenridge Park. “We saw a huge increase in usership,” says Scott Stover, parks project manager with the San Antonio Parks and Recreation Department. “People feel safe to walk there now. Crime problems have disappeared because of the number of people using the park.”

Road closures happen for different reasons. Some stem from the pressure of bicyclists and other non-motorized users. Some are due to complaints from neighbors about cruising or other annoyances. Some are initiated by a park agency for management or cost-cutting reasons. Virtually all are preceded by dire predictions and fierce debates over traffic impacts.

The first famous battle over traffic on a park road took place in New York City’s Greenwich Village. In 1955, Robert Moses, New York’s peerless builder of both roads and parks, proposed converting a street in Washington Square Park into a four-lane highway. The community rallied in opposition, saying the road should be eliminated entirely. After a three-year battle, the city offered a compromise, killing the highway but approving a plan to rebuild the street because “closing [the park] to traffic would be injurious to the surrounding community and to the city.”

Neighborhood activists demanded a test closure. When the experiment showed little traffic impact, the city agreed to close the road permanently. Washington Square has since become among the most heavily used 10 acres of parkland in the nation. Jane Jacobs, writing about the result in her book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, reported what has been noticed many times since: “The cars — or some cars — disappeared into thin air.”

Contrary to the conventional assumption, park road closures usually result in a total decrease in traffic, even outside the park. In New York, a 2004 traffic study on a full Central Park loop road closure found that most surrounding roadways were mini-

mally affected, with some travel times and volumes even decreasing. When the loop was closed in February, 2005 for assembly and disassembly of the massive “Gates” exhibition by the artist Christo, little effect was felt on surrounding streets.

New York City is now planning another reduction in car traffic, limiting weekday auto use on the remaining open segment to four hours out of every 24. It appears likely that a full, year-round auto ban in Central Park is near, almost 40 years after the first tentative step was taken under Mayor John Lindsay.

For political reasons, it is never easy to close a park road — but it is easiest if the road in question has little traffic to begin with. When Baltimore created the first segments of the Gwynns Falls Trail from 1999 to 2003, it used the opportunity to close six miles of park roads to serve as the spine of the 14-mile greenway.

“The road beds were a major factor” in building the trail, says Halle Van der Gaag, executive director of the Jones Falls Watershed Association and a former Gwynns Falls project manager for the Trust for Public Land. Since the rutted and disconnected roads had been only lightly used by vehicles, the resulting protests were muted.

By 2004, portions of San Antonio’s 344-acre Brackenridge Park were perceived as unsafe. It was determined that auto traffic, even at low levels in the more obscure sections, was deterring users. “The roads were only wide enough for cars, making others avoid the area, and the road cut the park up into separate segments,” says Scott Stover, who helped redesign Brackenridge.

As called for in the award-winning master plan, one mile of roadway was converted to a walking and biking trail. Not only has usage picked up but the city has received dozens more compliments than complaints.



More controversial closures are those that affect many hundreds of autos per day. Some drivers arrive by car but enjoy the park by foot. Others want to have the entire park experience from within a car. Some are willing to give up four-wheel convenience for the joys of a quieter, more relaxing and better-smelling park; others are adamantly opposed to change.

Cities that rise to the challenge are generally rewarded for their courage. In Garden of the Gods, a nationally known icon of Colorado Springs, Colorado, pedestrians had for years been forced to share the surface with “a thousand cars,” according to Rick Stevenson of the city’s parks and recreation department. For reasons of safety and just plain appreciation of the resource, Colorado Springs finally closed the road segment nearest the dramatic rock formations and converted it to a walkway.

“By removing the vast amount of traffic moving through that busy central area, access was improved,” says Stevenson. (Cars can still use the loop road located farther from the rocks.)

A similar result was achieved on a smaller scale in the early 1990s in Indianapolis’s historic Garfield Park. By closing only a quarter-mile stretch of park drive, the city resolved two different problems: opportunistic short-cut traffic in the daytime and cruising for drugs and sex at night. The other 1.75 miles of the park’s roadways, which serve the conservatory and other attractions, were left untouched. Both the park and the neighborhood have been undergoing a gradual renaissance ever since. In 2001 the park benefited from a multi-million-dollar gift from the Lilly Endowment.

Of all the cars-vs.-park situations, the most difficult to resolve are those involving daily commuters — high-powered (and highly stressed) residents and suburbanites accustomed to using park roads as part of their regimen. This is the case with Cheesman Park in Denver, Overton Park in Memphis, and upper Rock Creek Park in Washington, D.C. None of these parks was designed to serve the continuous flow of rush-hour drivers that use them now.

Rock Creek Park annually gets two million non-motorized users and 14 million drivers. Beginning in the mid-1970s, because of pressure from cyclists and environmentalists, certain portions of Beach Drive, a bucolic four-mile-long, two-lane road, were closed to traffic on Sundays. That section quickly became the most popular area of the park.

In 1981, following extensive public discussion, the closure was extended to Saturdays and holidays, and National Park Service Superintendent Jim Redmond gave a verbal commitment to explore weekday closures. When Redmond died soon after, however, the initiative was shelved. Agitation from cyclists and others eventually forced the National Park Service to undertake a study, but that dragged on for eight years. Finally, despite 2-1 public support for weekday closures, the controversy proved too intense and in 2007 the park service opted to leave the roadway situation unchanged.

Some motorists are wedded to park roads because they can park there. St. Louis’s Forest Park probably has more internal roadway mileage than anyone needs for trans-

portation purposes, but people are loath to give up all that convenient curb edge for free parking. John F. Kennedy Drive in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park has been closed to automobiles on Sundays since the 1960s, and the car-free program is wildly successful with the public. But when residents pushed a plan for Saturday closure as well, they were met with resistance from the de Young Museum, located inside the park.

Despite a nearby 800-stall parking garage, officials at the de Young contended that the road provided "much needed parking for our visitors and volunteers." Under pressure, Mayor Gavin Newsom vetoed the plan but worked out a compromise: A shorter segment of the road would be made car-free on Saturdays and shuttle service would be added. In return, bike advocates agreed to refrain from pushing for additional auto restrictions for five years.

Whatever type of road is considered for closure, park planners must address the underlying issue of access. If private automobiles are banned, then walking and bicycling options are needed as well as better transit — whether in the form of trolleys, buses, taxis, or horse-drawn carriages.

In car-crazy Houston, Hermann Park is getting a double rail makeover. When the city constructed its new MetroRail system in 2003, it purposely sited two stations in the park. Now the Hermann Park Conservancy is completely rebuilding the park's historic miniature train in order to pick up visitors at the light-rail stations; it serves as a legitimate — and pleasant — internal transportation system (even if it's a bit tight for adults).

In Atlanta's Piedmont Park, officials have improved pedestrian connections and built drop-off areas for cars. More importantly, Piedmont Park is directly connected to the city's ambitious new Belt Line transit-and-bike project, which will eventually encircle downtown.

In Golden Gate Park, part of the city's offer was to provide free, motorized shuttle service to seniors and the disabled so they could reach access points throughout the 1,017-acre park. And, although bicyclists decried the new parking garage near the DeYoung Museum for stimulating more driving, it also includes an area for bikes.

It is hard to reduce the car's domination of parks, and success usually requires an incremental approach. As Jane Jacobs, that keen observer of both cities and autos, wrote in 1961, "Like any strategy aimed at keeping things working, [this one] has to be engaged in as a form of evolution."

See table showing road closures on next page.

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CITY PARKS WHICH HAVE CLOSED ONE OR MORE ROADS TO CARS

City	Park	Road Name	Mileage	Year First Closed	Closure Time	Notes
Atlanta	Piedmont Park	Piedmont Park Drive	2.9	1983	Full-Time	
Baltimore	Gwynns Falls Trail	Ellicott Drive (4 mi.) & Wethersville Rd. (2 mi.)	6	1972, 2000	Full-Time	
Colorado Springs	Garden of the Gods	Gateway Road	0.25	1996	Full-Time	Inner loop: cars still allowed on outer loop
Dallas	Fair Park	First Ave.	0.25	2004	Full-Time	Reconstructed as pedestrian promenade
Denver	Washington Park	Park Loop (Marion Pkwy/Humboldt Dr.)	2	1985	Full-Time	3 spots open for parking access
El Paso	Franklin Mountain State Pk	Scenic Drive	3	2008	Part-time	Closed to cars Sundays, 6 am - Noon, Apr-Aug
Hartford, Conn.	Pope Park	Pope Park Dr.	0.2	2005	Full-Time	Road had previously divided the park
Houston	Memorial Park	Picnic Loop	1.2	1994	Part-time	Closed to cars weekdays before 10 am and after 3pm
Indianapolis	Garfield Park	Garfield Park Dr.	0.15	1990	Full-Time	Portion converted to trail to prevent through traffic
Milwaukee	Lake Park	Lake Park Rd. (former Inner Park Drive)	0.5	1975	Full-Time	Portions of old carriage road converted to trail
Nashville	Centennial Park	Lakeside Loop Rd.	0.25	2002	Full-Time	
New Orleans	Audubon Park	Audubon Jogging Path	3.1	1980	Full-Time	
New York	Washington Square Park	Fifth Ave.	0.2	1959	Full-Time	Roadway fully eliminated
New York	Central Park	Central Park Dr.	6	1966	Part-Time	Internal loop car-free except during weekday rush hours
New York	Prospect Park	Center Dr. & Wellhouse Dr.	0.5	1980	Full-Time	
New York	Prospect Park	Prospect Park Dr.	3.5	1966	Part-Time	Internal loop car-free except during weekday rush hours
New York	Silver Lake (Staten Island)	Silver Lake Dr.	1.25		Part-time	Closed to cars on evenings and weekends in summer
New York	Forest Park (Queens)	Forest Park Dr.	1.25	1966	Full-Time	From Woodhaven to Memorial
Philadelphia	Fairmount Park	Martin Luther King Dr.	4	1982	Part-time	Saturday-Sunday until 5 pm, April to October
San Antonio	Brackenridge Park	Wilderness Rd & Parfun Way	1	2004	Full-Time	Converted to trail
San Francisco	Golden Gate Park	John F. Kennedy Dr.	2	1965	Part-Time	Car-free Sunday for many years; Saturday closure added 2007
Washington, D.C.	The National Mall	Washington Dr. & Adams Dr.	2	1976	Full-Time	Two of four roads converted to gravel walkways
Washington, D.C.	Rock Creek Park	Beach Dr.	4	1981	Part-Time	Car-free weekends and holidays
Washington, D.C.	East & West Potomac Pk	Ohio Dr.	5	1998	Part-time	Car-free summer weekends, with shuttle service
Washington, D.C.	Thomas Circle	14th St. NW	0.1	2007	Full-Time	Cut-through roadway eliminated, replaced with lawn
Washington, D.C.	Logan Circle	13th St. NW	0.1	2000	Full-Time	Cut-through roadway eliminated, replaced with lawn
		Average	1.95			
		Total	50.7			
		Closure Percentages				
					Part-Time	35%
					Full-Time	65%