



# *What does “All Abilities” mean?*

Report produced by the Halifax Bike Mayor and the Halifax Cycling Coalition

April 2021



## What Does “All Abilities” mean?

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This report was produced with the results from a survey developed and analyzed by Jillian Banfield, Halifax Bike Mayor.

Text by Jillian Banfield, Halifax Bike Mayor

Layout by Meghan Doucette, Executive Director, Halifax Cycling Coalition

Halifax Cycling Coalition  
5557 Cunard St, Box 3, 2nd Floor  
Halifax, NS B3K 1C5  
(902) 802-8004  
contact@cyclehalifax.ca  
cyclehalifax.ca



Halifax Cycling Coalition



@bikehfx / @BikeMayorHfx



@cyclehalifax

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## SUMMARY

- We sought community input about their understanding of “all abilities” in cycling.
- Responses reflected many interpretations of the term.
- “All abilities” is not an accurate or appropriate way to refer to infrastructure that is meant to include disabled people.
- Halifax’s decision makers need to clearly describe who the cycling network is for so that we can all have a shared understanding.
- The responses to this survey are a call to action for Halifax to rapidly design and implement cycling infrastructure that is radically inclusive.

## 1. WHY DO WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND THE TERM “ALL ABILITIES”?

Halifax is working on what it calls its “all ages and abilities” cycling network. The “all abilities” part is unclear, despite repeated requests for active transportation planners and councillors to define the term. Does it mean cycling ability or experience? Does it mean disability? If so, it’s inaccurate, because not every disabled person is able to cycle. With no consensus about the term, Halifax’s Bicycle Mayor, in collaboration with the Halifax Cycling Coalition, set out to get a sense from the community of what “all abilities” cycling means to them.

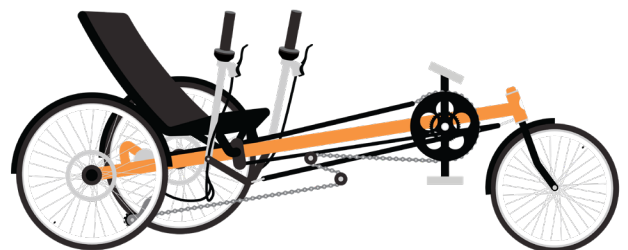
## 2. GATHERING COMMUNITY INPUT

Via social media, we invited people to respond to an online survey about what “all abilities” means to them with respect to cycling in Halifax. We gathered responses between January 25, 2020 and April 3, 2020. Given that the COVID-19 pandemic began partway through

data collection, it was difficult to advertise the survey and expect people to respond when such turmoil was beginning in all our lives. Despite the difficulties with data collection, people provided rich responses and many insights into the power of cycling to enable mobility for many people.

### People were invited to respond to 2 questions:

1. Was there a time when cycling enabled mobility for you or someone you know? For example, riding an e-bike when a sprained ankle made walking difficult. Please share that story or experience.
2. What does “all abilities” mean to you when it comes to cycling? This can be anything! Examples of aspects you could comment on are the design of a cycling lane, the way you want to feel when cycling, the kinds of interactions you want to have while cycling.



### 3. WHAT WE HEARD

A total of 56 people provided an answer to at least one of the questions. For each question, we identified themes and provide examples of unedited responses to highlight each theme.

### 4. WHEN CYCLING ENABLED MOBILITY

Respondents provided 39 examples of times when cycling enabled mobility for themselves or someone they know. We identified a theme relating to:

#### 4.1 Allowing Mobility for Disabled People

- I was born with spina bifida, and have always had trouble walking, especially on hard surfaces. Walking a city block, or a trip around the mall, is more than enough to kill my back, but I can ride a bike for miles without any problems.
- I have osteoarthritis walking any distance is painful however cycling which takes the pressure off the joints allows me to stay active and keep leg muscles strong.

We identified another theme related to:

#### 4.2 Allowing Mobility During Temporary Injury

- biking while recovering from a broken foot (before I walked ~30 minutes to work, but that was slow and painful with a walking cast (and when I first took it off) cycling put far less impact on my foot.
- I struggle with running injuries and bicycling allows me to stay active while allowing myself to heal.

We identified another theme related to:

#### 4.3 The Benefits of Ebikes

- Pre hip replacement my friend could hardly walk. She bought an e-bike and gained mobility again. After she had surgery she was able to use it more during recovery and is still cycling to this day.
- I use an e bike to commute 11 kms each way to and from work -using mostly the multi-use paved walking and cycling paths. In my fifties, the ebike lets me pedal when I can and the hills along my route no longer stop me from using this bike. So we now are a one car family, sold the second car!
- Electric bike cycling has changed my perspective on being outdoors in the winter. I’m 54 and now use my Ebikes for grocery shopping (with my Aosom wagon) and my husband and I both use our Ebikes for exercise. I have a shoulder injury right now (an impingement) that is holding me back from other activities but I can still bike ride. We wear snow suits! So much fun!



## What Does “All Abilities” mean?

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- having access to an e-bike would have been extremely liberating for me as I have spinal injuries, fibromyalgia, and osteoarthritis so I can't ride a non-powered cycle.

## 5. WHAT DOES “ALL ABILITIES” MEAN TO YOU?

Respondents provided 56 descriptions of what “all abilities” means to them for cycling. We identified a theme related to:

### 5.1 Infrastructure that Supports a Wider Range of Bikes and People

- To me that includes all disabilities, or at least as many as possible. For instance, my disabilities preclude me from riding a non-powered bike but I would be interested in seeing whether there are e-bikes that I could easily ride and handle
- To me, that indicates physical abilities so I would be curious to know if any consideration has been given to disabled people who physically cannot ride a bicycle? Personally, I have spinal injuries and osteoarthritis and do not have the ability to pedal due to pain, nor would I be able to remain upright on a bicycle due to balance problems. I would also be concerned about an e-bike running out of charge even if it were a three-wheeler that I could keep upright, I would then be unable to push it along to a charging point. For those who would be able to ride e-bikes, how many charging points are there around the city and how far apart are they?
- Assistive and unconventional bike designs are accommodated by default, including trailers, tandems, recumbents, cargo bikes,

trikes, etc. (and sufficient width for one of these to pass another). The Halifax Transit ferries (and possibly the elevator at Woodside Ferry Terminal?) fail this test.

- Someone on a recumbent or a three wheeler should be able to ride safely ... so that a wider range of physical abilities would be accommodated. My dream at least!
- Wide enough and safe enough cycling lanes to accommodate all sizes and styles of bike. Cycling lanes away from heavy traffic when possible but still access popular destinations and areas of the city. Ample bike parking.
- To me, it means people should not feel scared or intimidated - everyone needs to start somewhere, and we won't build a biking culture unless beginners feel comfortable.



We identified another theme related to

### 5.2 Safety

- Intersection design must include protection, safe places to wait, safe passage to turning lanes, and dedicated bike signals if appropriate.
- Path protection (and buffer width) must be sufficient to prevent riders from falling directly into traffic if they need to swerve, lose their balance, etc.
- All abilities means anybody on a bike can get

into a lane and get where they're going without worrying about the consequence of a fall or a hit. They don't have to fight traffic, mash pedals or aggressively take the lane.

- I want to feel safe when cycling. I do not want to feel that I have to worry the whole time about cars. I am 65 and would like to cycle until I die. When I was a child my elderly neighbour rode his bike to do his shopping despite being slow and ponderous. I would like to think someone like that would be safe cycling in Halifax. I don't see anyone like that now. Many older people cycle on rail trails, some brave the roads, but there are many more cycling than are ever seen on the roads of Halifax. They feel they have to leave town to cycle safely.
- The current bike lanes ie Windsor street, are to me more unsafe than riding in traffic. Cars parked, busses pulling over, they are already narrow. We need protected physically separated lanes for bikes. I take a much longer route to work than i should have to because there are streets and intersections that are not safe.

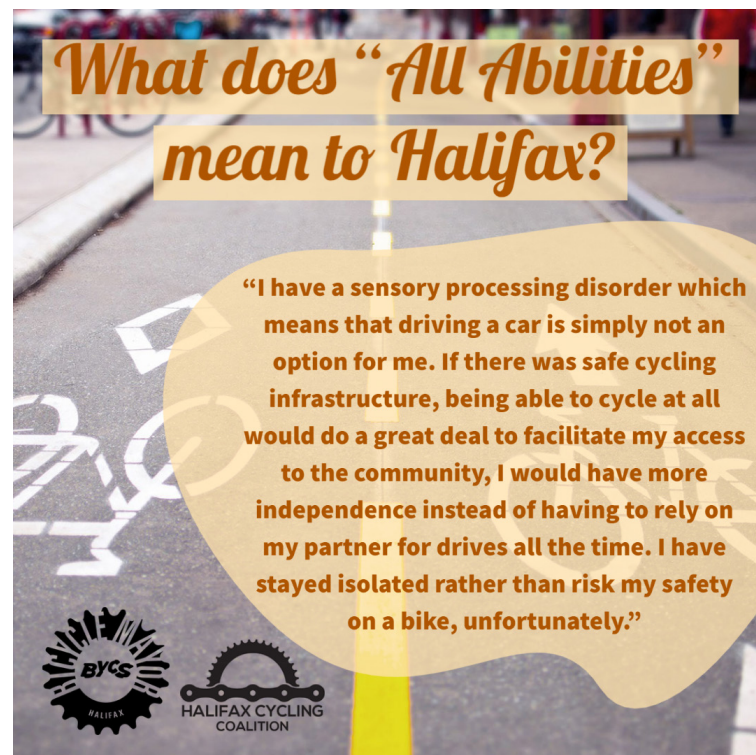
We identified another theme related to:

### 5.3 Freedom and Independence

- Being able to cycle at all would do a great deal to facilitate my access to the community. I have a sensory processing disorder which means that driving a car is simply not an option for me. If there was safe cycling infrastructure, I'd have more independence instead of having to rely on my partner for drives all the time.
- I think of the feeling ease and freedom brought when cycling on a trail in the

woods, where most cyclists feel at home. wide enough to pass slower movers, separate from cars, with as few as possible conflict points

- It means that if I need an electric bike to get back up hills, it's okay and I am not shamed or penalized by bylaw. It means that our bike lanes accommodate parents pulling stroller/trailers, incumbent riders including hand bikes, speedy athletic types and chubby ladies nearing 50 who just like the wind in their face sometimes. It means I can get out and ride with the same kind of understanding and support from other cyclists and drivers that out-of-shape runners get at the Bluenose marathon.
- I think at a minimum it is creating an environment in which people feel safe to cycle at whatever speed they are comfortable with, and being able to make convenient, safe stops whenever they wish.



## What Does “All Abilities” mean?

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We identified another theme related to:

### 5.4 Children

- Children can ride the route on their own bikes, with or without adult accompaniment.
- It means that if I was with a child, I would be more focused on talking to them about how their day was then to “watch out!”
- All abilities for my family is me and my kids, we can’t swarm the sidewalk but some are too little to be on the road. Unprotected bike lanes are just dangerous. Dedicated trails and paths are the best but we have to use neighborhood roads to get to the trails.



A few respondents made important comments about their perceptions of the term “all abilities”, for example:

*“This term is frustrating to me, as someone who can not use a bicycle. It is further frustrating because, while I understand the value of bike lanes, the term ‘all abilities’ is not accurate. By saying ‘all abilities’ you erase the fact that there are actually people who this is not accessible to (yes, I understand that biking makes things more accessible to some, but once again, not all.). I think this term is also tied up in the virtue signalling that a lot of biking campaigns subscribe to. Biking is ‘good for your health, the environment, bike lanes are a part of a modern city.’ So we build these identities around how, if you ride your bike, you are a good person because of the aforementioned attributes that we subscribe to biking. If the term was ‘most abilities’ or ‘widely accessible’ it would be more accurate and certainly less alienating.”*

This comment is echoed by people like Gabrielle Peters, a disabled wheelchair user in Vancouver who also describes “all abilities” as an erasure of disability experiences. She questions whether “all abilities” is a euphemism for disability or whether it means less cycling ability, such as that of children who are just beginning to cycle. Given that respondents to this survey provided examples of understanding “all abilities” to mean being able to ride with children, the term is ambiguous.



## 6. WHAT DO THESE RESULTS MEAN FOR CYCLING IN HALIFAX?

The rich responses to the survey shed light on aspects of cycling that are not often discussed. We rarely see representations of the type of cycling that respondents described in this survey. We did not have a large sample size or a representative sample of Halifax residents, but we did obtain insights into the worlds of people who are just trying to get around by bike and who want to cycle more, if only the supports existed for them to do so. In general, the responses to this survey are a call to action for Halifax to rapidly design and implement cycling infrastructure that is radically inclusive.

## 7. WHAT DOES ALL ABILITIES MEAN?

Given the lack of clarity the term “all abilities” and the potential harm it can do to disabled people, we would like to see a different term used that accurately reflects what the cycling network is meant to achieve. Is Halifax designing and implementing cycling infrastructure that allows a greater range of disabled people to cycle? Or is Halifax virtue signalling?

Words matter. People deserve clarity about the goals of the cycling network. Disabled people often feel excluded or forgotten. If the cycling network is truly meant to include disabled people, then make it clear through words and through infrastructure.



**What does “All Abilities” mean to Halifax?**

“Cycling has enabled me to keep moving after an accident in my early twenties. Walking any distance can be painful so biking is my activity of choice. Now in my late 50s I bike to work... [“All abilities”] means anyone any age or physical challenge can cycle. However, Halifax and Nova Scotia politicians do not see the benefits of this.”




**What does “All Abilities” mean to Halifax?**

“My elderly mother is disabled and cannot drive but does cycle on some safe routes. [“All abilities”] means genuine, connected cycle route protected from traffic in all aspects, especially at intersections...”



