

Showdown in Toronto over Jarvis lane change
Effort to make the street more bike-friendly expected to meet tough resistance

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CITY HALL BUREAU CHIEF

In what is shaping up as the tightest vote at city council so far this year, a proposal to narrow Jarvis Street by one lane has taken on added life as a wedge issue for those eager to topple Mayor David Miller in next year's municipal election.

"The mayoralty campaign in some people's minds has been on since the turn of this year," said Councillor Brian Ashton (Ward 36, Scarborough Southwest), among those set to vote down a plan at council next week to eliminate a reversible north-south lane on Jarvis to make room for bikes.

"A lot of these issues are attempts to differentiate yourself - to find some key wedge issue that differentiates you from the mayor," he said yesterday, citing the Jarvis plan that could add up to two minutes travel for drivers between Bloor Street and downtown, and other traffic measures that recently have stirred the ire of drivers.

Kyle Rae (Ward 27, Toronto Centre-Rosedale), the local councillor and chief advocate of creating dedicated bike lanes, also sees the fight playing out on a wider political battlefield.

"Members of council who have aspirations for the next election are turning it into the 'war on cars,' " he said with disgust. "What I am doing on Jarvis is asking drivers to share that road with pedestrians, cyclists and transit."

Source: City of Toronto website

NARROWING JARVIS If a proposal going to city council Monday is approved, it would start the ball rolling on narrowing Jarvis Street between Queen and Bloor streets. Jarvis today (top): Jarvis is currently five lanes with a reversible centre lane that runs south in the morning rush hour and north in the afternoon rush hour. Jarvis proposal (bottom): The plan eliminates the centre lane to create four lanes for cars, two of which are shown here, with the curb lanes extra wide to accommodate cyclists.

The mayor's critics even have a few of his allies on side, but still do not think they have the votes to kill off the Jarvis plan.

But they say an accumulation of traffic changes, including a plan for dramatically wider sidewalks at streetcar stops along Roncesvalles Avenue, talk of an end to some one-way

streets downtown and the prospect of more restrictions on right turns at red lights, as raising a political red flag for car drivers.

"I suspect if councillors are listening to their constituents in Etobicoke, Scarborough and North York, they must be hearing the same message about the difficulty of getting around the city," said Councillor Case Ootes (Ward 29, Toronto-Danforth).

A spokesman for a recently formed "responsible government" coalition that includes council's right-wing minority, Mr. Ootes said the Jarvis plan should be put on hold. "There needs to be a full public debate on what this is doing to the city in terms of the traffic chaos and the difficulty in getting around," he said.

Even if approved, many hurdles remain before any change comes to a major traffic artery. The \$6.35-million project is not funded in the city's 10-year capital program. As well, critics could appeal to the province for a stepped-up environmental assessment, beyond the scope of one carried out for the city.

Meanwhile, car drivers and cyclists rev up for perhaps the tightest vote since last October when Mr. Miller and his allies, by a one-vote margin, held off calls for the province to declare the Toronto Transit Commission an "essential service."

Yesterday, members of the Moore Park Ratepayers Association and others opposed to losing a lane on Jarvis handed out leaflets along Mount Pleasant Road to rally support among drivers as they made their way downtown.

"We are talking to each member of council who will be looking at this," said Susan Prince, a member of the ratepayers group. "The push is on between now and next Monday morning," she said, a reference to the start of the two-day council meeting.

Just as concerned are cycling advocates livid over efforts by some to characterize the Jarvis project as anti-driver.

"Because of the whole war-on-the-car stuff, there is a bit of concern some of the councillors may backpedal a bit," said Yvonne Bambrick, a spokeswoman for the year-old Toronto Cyclists' Union.

With the council vote coming as the city marks the launch of Bike Month, she said a defeat of the proposal "would be quite an embarrassment to the city and a big step backwards for our city's thriving bike community."

At least one of the mayor's regular allies plans to vote against the lane reduction. "Jarvis works extremely well the way it is," said Councillor Gloria Lindsay Luby (Ward 4, Etobicoke Centre). "It's one of the best traffic management systems we have in the city."

Others who often vote with Mr. Miller are still undecided.

"If it does not make a major difference in the flow of traffic, then I would have no problem supporting it," said Councillor Suzanne Hall (Ward 1, Etobicoke North). But she says she does not have answers yet.

Councillor Paul Ainslie (Ward 43, Scarborough East), expects to vote against the Jarvis project "I don't get people calling my office and saying there are not enough bike lanes."

But he is under pressure to vote for the measure. "Councillor Rae is working the halls hard," Mr. Ainslie said.