The case for banning vehicles from Oxford Street in London is weak, adapted from *The Economist*, January 15th 2026

In the British version of Monopoly, a board game, Oxford Street belongs to the second-most expensive set of properties. It is as grand as Bond Street and Regent Street (two nearby shopping streets in central London) and is a cut above Piccadilly, the Strand and Trafalgar Square. Few visitors over the years have rendered such a positive judgment on it.

"Not London's most distinguished thoroughfare," wrote Virginia Woolf, a novelist and essayist, in the early 1930s. "There are too many bargains, too many sales." Then, and ever since, Oxford Street has been plagued by hucksters and hawkers. In Woolf's day they sold tortoises, by the 1980s dodgy perfumes, in the early 2020s overpriced sweets. Today people sell religion, especially around Oxford Circus, where Oxford Street crosses Regent Street.

London's authorities have had enough. Calling Oxford Street "iconic" but "in decline", the mayor, Sir Sadiq Khan, has created a development corporation that will exercise planning powers. He wants to pedestrianise a 900-metre stretch from the Selfridges department store to Oxford Circus, and perhaps eventually the whole street. Cars are already banned from much of the road. A consultation about rerouting buses ends on January 16th.

Some locals loathe that prospect. Michael Bolt of the Marylebone Association, a community group, argues that pedestrianisation would push buses, delivery vehicles and noise into narrow residential streets. An earlier plan was scuppered in 2018 after a protest party scooped more than 1,000 votes in local elections. It is likely to go ahead this time. Sir Sadiq and Westminster Council are both Labour.

A decade ago advocates of pedestrianisation argued that Oxford Street was appallingly polluted. The air is much cleaner these days, thanks partly to a citywide crackdown on noxious vehicles and partly to changes in public transport. About 33 buses an hour now trundle up the western part of Oxford Street, according to Transport for London. In 2015 fully 130 did. A monitor across the road from Selfridges shows that nitrogen-dioxide pollution has fallen by four-fifths since 2015.

Sir Sadiq now argues that Oxford Street is failing economically. Like filthy air, however, that is a past problem. Department stores and shops that were crushed a few years ago by e-commerce and covid-19 have been replaced by others or by offices. Savills, an estate agent, estimates that the vacancy rate on Oxford Street is below 1%. "It's in a very strong position," says Sam Foyle, co-head of global retail at the firm (he thinks that pedestrianisation would strengthen it even further).

Compared with Regent Street and Bond Street, Oxford Street is unruly. It has many landlords, thwarting attempts to impose a unified vision on the street. Money-changers and trinket shops abound. But it also has a wide range of clothes shops, from pricey Selfridges to discount Primark. Not everyone has the money or the body shape for Bond Street's boutiques.

The best reason to ban vehicles from Oxford Street is simple: it would be nice. Crowds of people walk the street, not only because of its shops but because it is an obvious way of traversing central London. They would benefit from the absence of motorised competition. And London would probably not regret the change. The pedestrianisation of the north side of Trafalgar Square in 2003 was controversial, with critics forecasting traffic mayhem. It now seems like the natural state of things.