

‘I have more money in my pocket and am healthier, too’

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As I was parking my bike in front of municipal hall recently, an elderly lady was unlocking her bike.

As I often do with fellow riders, we had a little bike talk. She told me she could no longer drive her car because she didn't pass her last driving test. So now she bikes to get around.

“You wouldn't believe how much money I get to keep in my pocket,” she said. “And I'm much healthier, too.”

I love these types of conversations, which I'd never have if I solely depended on my car to get around.

I was at municipal hall to take a look at the draft transportation plan. The district has been working on it for almost three years. A consultant recently did a presentation on it at a council workshop, during which the plan was discussed, as was whether a cycling and pedestrian advisory committee was a good idea to replace the former bicycle advisory committee.

Council generally felt it was better to have a transportation advisory committee than one that focuses on active transportation alone. This committee could deal with all aspects of transportation, including cars, transit, cycling, walking, and, last but not most certainly not least, the difficulties that disabled people have when trying to get around. And probably horses, too.

I can kind of understand the logic behind the wish of council members to broaden the scope. The problem is that there would be such a wide variety of issues to discuss, and so little time to do it, that a transportation committee could not possibly be effective. Also, when deciding on cycling issues, how much expertise would there be in the room?

It was said that “there aren't enough issues around cycling.” It's beyond me how anybody on council can make such a statement when Maple Ridge rates as the second worst municipality for cycling in Metro Vancouver, according to a bikeability study done at UBC.

As a reminder, I re-sent to council the hundreds of comments and concerns that HUB received from all sorts of cyclists over a period of about a year and a half, a few years ago. I stopped sending more comments at some point because I thought that council should have gotten the message by now.

It's essential to get on the saddle yourself to understand the issues. It really changes anyone's perspective. Only Coun. Bob Masse has so far accepted HUB's invitation to council for a bike ride to experience the bikeability of our town first-hand. If there weren't any issues around cycling, we'd see a lot more people out there on their bikes, and they wouldn't be riding on the sidewalks.

During the discussion about the advisory committee, some council members said they wanted to see the amounts proposed in the draft transportation plan for spending on cycling (\$25 million over the next 20 years) and walking (\$5 million) reversed. Just like that. No questions asked.

The problem is that these council members seem to feel that cycling and walking are competing for the same dollars. It's not that simple.

Some councillors wish to review the bylaw that allows cycling on the sidewalk. Sure. Our goal should be to get cyclists off the sidewalk. But you can't just throw us in front of the sharks.

One of the numbers that caught my attention when I started reading through the draft transportation plan was that more than 60 per cent of daily vehicle trips are within Maple Ridge. Usually politicians and planners tend to look at work trips. Actually 35 per cent, which is quite a respectable percentage, of Maple Ridge's workforce is locally employed and does not need to travel outside the community. But why do trips to school, to shop or to the hairdresser not matter? Many trips presently made by car could potentially be made by bike or walking, which would help us achieve some of our goals, whether it's reducing greenhouse gas emissions, air and noise pollution, improving people's health, reducing congestion or improving livability.

As long as cycling feels safe, and you have somewhere to park your bike securely.

HUB has requested the district, several times, to review the cycling plan for the town core. The chosen routes sometimes do not make sense for cyclists, aren't convenient and do not always lead to destinations. We see too many cyclists on the sidewalks, and we would like them to feel comfortable and safe on the road. The district is not interested.

Especially now that the district is working on an affordable housing strategy, and there is talk about a post-secondary school in Maple Ridge, we need to ensure that cyclists in our town core feel safe.

All affordable housing will be planned in and around the town core. Those who are in need of affordable housing, as well as students who are on a tight budget, benefit hugely from not

needing a car. A car on average eats up close to 20 per cent of a household budget. But for low-income households or students, this percentage would be much higher.

Walking significantly limits how far you can go, and transit doesn't always take you where you want to go. Cycling can offer that freedom, but only if it is made safe and convenient.

Some numbers from the draft plan that should, in my opinion, motivate us to try much harder to wean ourselves off the car as much as we can. Traffic in west Maple Ridge is expected to increase by 100 per cent over the next 20 years, and by 50 per cent in east Maple Ridge.

I hope that in 20 years time, we'll hear many more people say: "You wouldn't believe how much money I get to keep in my pocket."

And, I'm much healthier, too."

Jackie Chow is a member of the Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows chapter of HUB.