

Cycling: Let's help pedestrians by helping cyclists

Council reviews pedalling on sidewalks

Aug. 31, 2019 7:00 a.m.

City of Maple Ridge has allowed bikes on sidewalks city-wide since 2010. Sometimes, people on bikes don't feel safe on our roads and they seek refuge on the sidewalk. You can't argue with fear, council of the day admitted.

According to the current bylaw, riding on the sidewalk is allowed only "with due care and consideration."

Sidewalk cycling may make cyclists feel safer, but it can sometimes be more dangerous than cycling on the road when crossing intersections, especially when going in the wrong direction.

The problem is that many of our main roads were built for speeding car traffic only.

Making roads safer for cyclists will make sidewalks safer for pedestrians.

During the past 10 years, some councillors maintained that they wanted to get cyclists off the sidewalks.

In 2015, members of the city's homelessness task force met with our HUB Cycling committee. Council felt pressured to take action against a certain segment of the population, members of which were believed to be the ones knocking pedestrians off their feet while riding their bikes and weaving around at high speeds.

We pointed out the RCMP could just enforce the current bylaw, and that those who cycle on the sidewalk out of fear of cars, but who do so respectfully, should not be punished for others' bad behaviour.

When the Downtown Maple Ridge Business Improvement Association asked its members whether they would support lowering the speed limit to 30 km/h on Lougheed Highway, Dewdney Trunk Road, and 224th Street, in order to increase safety for pedestrians, cyclists and drivers, support was strong. Several members expressed the desire to get bikes off the sidewalks.

But lower speed limits would be difficult to enforce, according to city staff.

Lougheed Highway and Dewdney Trunk Road are designed as four-lane highways cutting through the heart of our town. What can we expect? Speeding cars, of course. They're just traffic sewers. Nice sidewalks though.

The re-design of 224th Street has definitely been an esthetic improvement. It also led to lower speeds. But it's still a busy street and not everyone is comfortable cycling in traffic.

In 2017, the active transportation advisory committee was tasked to come up with a recommendation about cyclists on sidewalks.

In July this year, their recommendation was finally presented to the current mayor and council. The committee proposed to ban bikes on downtown sidewalks on Lougheed, Dewdney and 224th Street, and to lower the speed limit on 224th Street between Dewdney and Lougheed to 30 km/h.

Our HUB Cycling committee can live with that, as long as council agrees to allow a public review of the downtown cycling network soon.

Building a good cycling network is about more than just drawing some lines on a map, and getting bikes out of the way of cars.

Council was also given several other options by staff. One of them was to ban bikes on sidewalks city-wide, just like in most of the rest of the province.

After barely any discussion, council is considering that, although the bylaw hasn't been changed yet. Lowering the speed limit on 224th Street was considered redundant, since the current average speeds are already just under 35 km/h.

Have our streets become safer for cycling over the past 10 years?

We have made some progress, but many gaps remain. And the car traffic has worsened.

We don't have a nice street grid system like in Vancouver, where there are quieter residential streets parallel to the main roads that can be traffic-calmed and made into great bikeways.

In much of Maple Ridge, there are few alternatives to the busy main roads for people on bikes. Therefore, safe cycling infrastructure along those main arterials and collector roads is not optional, but rather necessary.

Whether or not reasonable and safe alternative routes exist for bikes, it looks like this council is determined to ban bikes on all sidewalks. Our HUB committee unfortunately must be opposed.

The question is: Should the RCMP focus their resources on people riding on the sidewalk in a considerate manner?

ICBC statistics tell us that in B.C., 56 pedestrians are killed by cars, and 2,500 injured annually. Nine cyclists are killed and 1,600 are injured by motor vehicles every year.

What do we know about cyclist-pedestrian crashes? According to the B.C. Injury Research and Prevention Unit, between 2009 and 2017, about 10 pedestrians a year were injured by cyclists seriously enough to require treatment in hospital.

Obviously, the real danger to both pedestrians and cyclists continues to be motor vehicles.

We believe that council could do more to slow down car traffic as opposed to simply imposing a city-wide ban of bikes on sidewalks. Again, road design is key, and lowering the speed limit and strict enforcement of it.

Only by making our roads safer and more welcoming for human beings on bikes, can we convince them to stay off the sidewalks.

Personally, I'd rather risk a ticket than my life.

– Jackie Chow is a member of the Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows chapter of HUB Cycling.