

Spend on cycling close to home

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By Jackie Chow

Contributor

We've been warned multiple times in recent months that Canadian household spending is causing us to be ever deeper in debt.

But would that warning have any effect on this year's spending by Canadian families?

According to a Bank of Montreal survey, holiday shoppers are planning to spend on average \$674 on gifts this year, up from \$583 last year.

And the average Canadian is expected to spend more than \$85 on booze in December, also according to a Bank of Montreal report.

Canada is among the wealthiest countries in the world, so it's probably not a surprise.

According to Statistics Canada, Canadian households spend on average about \$11,000 on transportation.

About \$10,000 of that is spent on private transportation: cars, vans and trucks, including their operating cost.

We're spending roughly 20 per cent of our average household income on getting around by car. That means that in a five-day work week, the average person works one whole day just to pay for the cost of driving around in that car.

For a low-income family, this percentage would be higher, if they even have a car.

This doesn't include the amount that we are paying in taxes to pay for provincial roads and bridges, and in property taxes for building and maintaining municipal roads, as well as the mostly hidden cost of parking, which is passed on to all of us as residents or consumers, whether we drive or not.

The way that our transportation tax dollars are being spent – on car transportation, transit, and walking and cycling – has considerable influence on our own individual transportation spending.

According to Transport Canada figures, federal transit funding has seen a dramatic decrease in recent years, from \$1.1 billion in 2008 to about \$300 million in 2011.

By contrast, spending on roads was \$1.04 billion in 2008, but has averaged \$1.5 billion annually since then.

There is no federal budget nor a national plan for cycling, which is left up to the provinces and municipalities.

Never mind that physical inactivity costs tax payers \$6.8 billion a year.

Provincial and TransLink funding for transit is insufficient to maintain service levels, and we're facing cuts to some the bus routes in Maple Ridge.

TransLink cut its funding for cycling by half, to a meagre \$3 million per year.

Cycling funding by the province has been doubled this year to \$7.25 million. This funding is used to match spending by municipalities, where cycling investments matter most.

The true spending by the province is difficult to estimate, however, since cycling paths or bike lanes sometimes 'piggyback' on road projects and are not funded separately.

Most people will consider biking distances under five to seven kilometres in town if it's safe and convenient, but not many will bike across bridges like the Golden Ears Bridge and Pitt River on a daily basis. There is no doubt we do need those bridges to be accessible for long distance commuters – as well as recreational cyclists, just like they are accessible for cars.

But, unfortunately, municipal investments in cycling infrastructure pale compared to what's being spent on cycling for bridges.

The municipalities that can afford and are willing to spend more of their own money, also get a bigger slice of the pie in the form of regional and provincial matching grants.

Maple Ridge budgets \$50,000 annually for cycling improvements. This translates to about 65 cents per resident, which is equal to the cost of about half a litre of gasoline, which may take you, in your car, to your kid's school and back, once.

Canadians are spending about \$4,500 annually per capita. The direct (treating conditions) and indirect (loss of personal and financial productivity due to poor health) costs of a sedentary lifestyle amount to about 3.7 per cent of total spending, which is \$167 per person per year.

So how is it that we're OK with spending all this money on fixing people's health problems due to an inactive lifestyle, while we claim that we can't afford to pay for bike paths to keep our kids safe when they bike to school or to visit their friends – while making them healthier?

Unfortunately, some government decisions seem to be motivated more by politics than by scientific data, or even common sense.

Jackie Chow is a member of the Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows Chapter of HUB: Your Cycling Connection.