

VS/letters

Long road ahead for cyclists

One of the great things about this job is the opportunity to shamelessly advance personal interests, such as cycle commuting, once a year.

While Bike to Work Week has just passed (people cycled a total of 174,212 kilometres, says the Vancouver Area Cycling Network), we're still in June, which is Bike Month.

So it's worth highlighting the ups and downs of the two-wheeled, pedal-powered world, where earnest cyclists try to ease the environmental load of the rest of us, comfortably seatbelted into four wheels.

In Maple Ridge, a major project has been completed, allowing cyclists to move across the entire length of the district. It's called Bikeway 123 and roughly follows 123rd Avenue and other side streets, from 203rd Street to 256th Street.

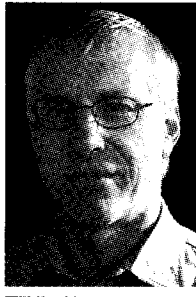
That's got to help suburb-bound cyclists a lot when they're pedalling from work, crossing the circuitous route over the Pitt River Bridge, and looking for the quietest, safest way home.

Such projects that turn existing side streets into bike lanes by putting up a few signs and lane markings is the most cost-effective and quickest way of encouraging people to try two wheels. Most cyclists just want a metre of space and some modest lane markings to delineate that space to keep cars and trucks at bay.

Next on Maple Ridge's to-do list is a separate bike path in both directions, on the north side of Lougheed Highway between 222nd Street and Laitly.

That will be a crucial link to move cyclists out of the downtown on to the bike paths farther west.

The district has \$100,000 earmarked for that and needs twice that, it's hoped from senior governments, to cover the \$300,000 cost.



Commentary

Phil Melnychuk

Which brings up the topic of money. While miracles can be achieved through wise use of dollars, cycling gets minimal financial commitment from the district.

From a roadworks project list of \$9.6 million in Maple Ridge taxpayer money for 2010 – bike lanes will get only \$100,000 – or one per cent of the total dollars spent on roads.

What if the district doubled that – spent a lofty \$200,000 on cycling improvements?

Maybe that would bring more cyclists out?

The story's the same for TransLink.

I wanted to compare the dollars spent on roads and bridges with that spent on cycling and mass transit infrastructure, just to make the point that we have no trouble spending millions on overpasses and road widening, but improving non-auto transportation is always like pulling teeth.

The request went to TransLink, our public, taxpayer-funded entity, for a few basic numbers, but after waiting weeks, I gave up, so I went to its website and got some incomplete numbers.

Cycling infrastructure dollars took a big hit in TransLink's 10-year base plan.

The money spent to help two wheelers is now only \$1 million a year, an 80-per-cent drop from a previous \$6 million a year.

But to its credit, over the next decade, TransLink will cut all funding for its major road network, while preserving the million yearly for cycling.)

(TransLink, in its current austerity drive, has cut elsewhere, reducing its bus service by 40 per cent next year. And in 2009, it spent seven times the money operating its bus and rail service – \$775 million – compared to \$115 million spent on roads and bridges. Its 10-year, bare-bones plan eliminates \$55 million in road improvements, while refurbishing buses, SkyTrain and SeaBus. It also spent \$10 million on a cycle bridge connected to the Canada Line over the Fraser River, \$25 million for a cycling path on the Golden Ears Bridge, and another \$8.7

million for the Central Valley Greenway. The agency also is about to allow cycling on Golden Ears Way between 203rd and the Lougheed Highway, providing speedier access to the Golden Ears Bridge.)

Looking down the road, from a self-interested perspective, bike paths have to be created/preserved/enhanced on Lougheed Highway, between Maple Ridge and Mission.

They're there already, they're called road shoulders, and they allow cyclists to connect, fairly safely, between both cities.

But as Lougheed Highway is improved and widened, those bike lanes have to be preserved.

They can't disappear (as they have during the current widening of Lougheed just east of Mission), leaving cyclists fighting for space with transport trailers and three-quarter tonne pickups.

If the planners do it right, kilometres of bike paths can be created with minimal dollars as the highway is upgraded.

An exciting project for the future, but not that far away, is the Experience the Fraser tourism project announced last year. That envisions a trail network that follows the Fraser River on both sides, from the Pacific Ocean to Hope.

Tourist potential for that is huge.

It could draw hundreds of day-trippers who'd like to pedal a loop trail along the river (known as the Stahlo River by First Nations), then return at day's end for lattes by the sea.

The project holds promise for cycle commuters, as well.

Imagine a paved path, three metres or so wide (with a gravel path beside for joggers), following the Fraser, joining Pitt Meadows, Maple Ridge and Mission and points farther west.

Bicycle riders, e-bicycle riders, electric scooters, roller bladers, skateboarders, Segways, even seniors on scooters could zoom along, safe from the cars and trucks that rule the road.

Phil Melnychuk is a reporter with The News.