

Stop putting needs of cars first

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Many of us are already frustrated driving on our congested roads, as more car-dependent subdivisions are added east and north in Maple Ridge.

Long gone are the days that the drive home gave us the opportunity to relax after a busy day's work. Not only do we have to deal with traffic back and forth to work and shop and play, but also on the streets where we live – the car is now king.

I think by far the saddest consequence of the way we've been designing not only Maple Ridge, but most North American cities, is that it has meant such a profound change in kids' lives, who never had any say in all of this.

Our quest for space in the 'burbs, made possible by our unconditional embrace of the private automobile, was supposed to give them more freedom and space to play and learn.

Instead, we've made them more dependent on us, adults. Few kids these days know the feeling of pride when they can show they're responsible enough to make the trip to school all on their own, which used to be pretty safe many years ago, when there were so many kids walking and cycling together in groups.

Many don't even know the joy of exploring an older neighbourhood, each street with its own unique character, with alleyways and bushes to play hide and seek, places to hang out, and where people know each other and keep an eye out for each other's kids.

Somehow we've come to believe that the only way for us to get around is by car, and we've decided that people don't belong on the roads, which have become the almost exclusive domain for cars.

Because they're no longer safe, cyclists are urged to get off the main arterials, and have to take confusing zig-zag routes.

This year in Maple Ridge, \$50,000 will be spent on signs for cyclists, so hopefully we don't get lost.

Is this the cost of cycling, or the cost of driving?

At the beginning of the 20th Century, streets were full of people, crossing (jaywalking) the streets as they pleased. When cars were first introduced, people demanded laws that they go no faster than five km/h. When cars caused injuries and accidents, this caused a backlash against automobiles.

Over the years, much has changed. As roads became busier and traffic speeds increased, roadways were getting too dangerous for pedestrians. Engineers redesigned and widened the roads to increase traffic flow, often leaving little or no space for those on foot. Not only roads, but also parking lots have taken over much of our urban spaces. As a result, up to 40 per cent of space in urban areas is used for moving and parked cars, and much of the remaining space suffers from the effects of the noise and pollution, and lack of vibrancy that they cause. Somehow we've accepted this, as well as the fact that cars annually kill some 400 and injure about 25,000 people in B.C. alone.

More and more people are waking up from the 'American dream,' realizing it's not what they signed up for. The trend is that more people prefer to live in walkable, people-friendly neighbourhoods, with a school, grocery store, restaurant and perhaps a pub at walking or biking distance.

Looking at the way Maple Ridge is expanding, those who make the decisions in our town don't seem to believe there is any other way than to allow further unbridled sprawl, sadly transforming more of the pretty countryside that makes the district so unique into boring cookie-cutter suburbs, while putting the needs of cars before any other mode of transportation. I think there is another way. It's far from easy, but let's at least give it a try.

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