

Timing is right for car-free street

By [Jackie Chow - Maple Ridge News](#)

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I have a suggestion for Maple Ridge municipal council: since all our roads are mainly for cars, why not dedicate one block of one street in our downtown to people – pedestrians, and, of course, cyclists.

In Europe, many cities have car-free streets – even car-free town centres – and more of them pop up all the time.

Even in North America car-free zones are becoming more popular. Not just popular among shoppers, but also among business-owners who realize it's good for business.

Besides such examples, there are plenty of articles and websites praising the many benefits of streets that ban or limit the use of cars.

Remember what happened with Hornby Street in Vancouver, where Vision Vancouver-led City Council was so bold to install bike lanes, to the chagrin of many business owners and motorists alike? When earlier this year, business owners were asked to cooperate with a study to determine how much revenue their businesses might have lost due to the bike lanes, only a handful or so were willing to participate. Here was their chance to prove that the bike lanes were hurting their bottom line, and they declined.

I have yet to hear about them still complaining. And you know what, vacancy rates in the area have dropped since the bike lanes were put in, a fact that is rather under reported by the media.

Why would people who can park their cars right in front of a store spend more money?

Admittedly, they usually spend more money each time they shop, but people who don't (want to) drive all the time don't necessarily spend less. They tend to shop more often. Studies have shown that in cities with infrastructure that's more conducive to walking and cycling, there are many higher-income people who walk or bike for transportation. These people are able to save money on transportation, and have more money left in their pockets to spend on other things. If they can bike to do their shopping, they will frequent local shops more often, which benefits the local economy.

Many people seem to be fed up with the lack of shopping in Maple Ridge. I doubt the Agricultural Land Commission will allow Albion Flats to be paved over to satisfy our shopping cravings. More commercial development in east Maple Ridge is definitely overdue. No need, though, for an oversized big-box mall in Albion that will encourage people from all over town to drive there to get their groceries a few bucks cheaper. We might save some as individuals, but as a community we would pay for it dearly with even more congested and noisier streets, more

valuable land sacrificed to huge parking lots and the encouragement of more sprawl. And Maple Ridge would ill become more and more like other boring, cookie-cutter suburbs.

I think the timing of the suggestion for a car-free street is just right. Thanks to a smart decision by our council to purchase those run-down properties between Selkirk and 119th avenues —no longer such an embarrassing sight for this prime location in downtown Maple Ridge —we now have the perfect blank slate for a car-free shopping and dining street, right smack in the middle between Haney Place and Valley Fair malls. Why not connect the two shopping malls with a people-pleasing, car-free street, lined with streetside cafés, interesting boutiques and some nice restaurants with outdoor patios? It's amazing what some nice land- or streetscaping can do, with benches where people could sit and talk, shielded from the noise and pollution from motorbikes and pick-up trucks.

Mixed use – with residential apartments above, some offices, perhaps an educational institution above ground level, as well – would encourage people-traffic at all times of the day.

Parking could be underground, with access from surrounding streets. Such a street – with careful planning – has great potential to become a real people-gathering place.

As to resistance among retailers to make their street car-free: there are no retailers, yet.

We, the people of Maple Ridge, own this property, so it's up to us to decide what we want to do with it. Are we ever going to have another opportunity like this? Probably not in a long time. I think it all depends on what we ask for.

Send an e-mail to council at mayorandcouncil@mapleridge.ca.

Finally, a request to candidates for the upcoming municipal election: please send your e-mail address to me at jchow23708@yahoo.ca. I will be sending out a short list of questions on cycling to all candidates. The answers will be posted on the VACC website.

Any candidates who would like to let voters know more about what they intend to do to improve cycling in our communities can send me their views, and I will post them on our blog: <http://www.rm cyclist.info/>.

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