

Not moving fast enough on cycling

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

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In late June, more than 800 delegates from countries around the world, including some from Pitt Meadows and Maple Ridge, took part in Velo-city Global 2012, the world's premier international cycling planning conference, in Vancouver.

It was a place to find inspiration, knowledge and experience for politicians, planners and advocates (those who could afford to attend), who were looking for ways to get more people to bike in their cities.

I couldn't attend the conference, but my husband Ivan, who co-chairs the local HUB committee, did, as a member of the organizing committee of the conference.

I decided to join him, with our two kids, for the Velo-city bike parade in Vancouver on the Thursday. The streets of Vancouver were filled with hundreds of 'Bixi' bikes from Montreal's successful bike share program, brought to Vancouver for the occasion. It was a wonderful feeling to share the road with hundreds of other people on bikes, and it made me chuckle to see the members of the Dutch delegation with inflatable clogs on their heads in place of helmets, just to make a point.

One of the 'rock stars' of urban cycling to be found at the conference was Gil Peñalosa, the former commissioner of parks and recreation in Bogotá, Columbia.

Peñalosa, under his brother Enrique's leadership as mayor, oversaw in the late '90s the development of the 'Cicloruta', an extensive bicycle network that presently consists of more than 340 kilometres of bike paths and lanes that help curb congestion and provide a safe, cheap, equitable and convenient way of getting around for everyone.

Bogota is also the place where the term 'Ciclovía' was born. It's a tremendously popular weekly event. For several hours every Sunday, 120 kilometers of main streets are blocked to car traffic, and about 1.5 million people on foot, on bicycles, and roller blades take over the streets. People exercise, do aerobics, make new friends and have a wonderful time.

These days, Peñalosa continues to inspire as the executive director of 8-80 Cities, a non-profit organization based in Toronto that promotes a vision of livable and healthy cities for all.

Our family had a chance to have a brief chat with him when he happened to sit down beside our table at the coffee shop in the Sheraton Hotel, where the conference was held, and must have overheard my muffled “that’s Gil Peñalosa,” because he came over and introduced himself to us. When my daughter lamented that I tend to raise my voice when I ‘talk cycling’ – which is, of course, pretty embarrassing – he re-assured her: “Don’t worry about it. It’s called passion, and some day you will feel it too.”

Peñalosa’s message to participants was one of urgency. We live in a perfect storm: cities are facing traffic congestion, climate change, an obesity crisis, an economic crisis and unprecedented population growth.

In the next 25 years, the population in Canada is going to grow by about 6.9 million people, which is twice the population of B.C.

In Greater Vancouver alone, the growth is expected to be 40 per cent, or more than a million people.

We need to move now and we need to move fast. Politicians need to have a vision, and guts. New visions do not start with majority support. You have to take a risk to implement them.

Peñalosa feels that Vancouver has done great things so far, but things aren’t moving fast enough.

He pointed to some examples, like Vienna, which has 1,200 km of separated bike lanes, and Seville, with only about 0.2 per cent of trips made by bike only five years ago, now has 140 km of bike lanes, and about seven per cent of trips are made by bicycle.

“When you build for cars, you get more cars. If you build for people, you get happy and healthy people,” Peñalosa said.

Our family also had an unexpected opportunity to attend a presentation by the ‘Justin Bieber’ of urban cycling, Mikael Colville-Anderson, who was born in Fort McMurray, but lives now in one of the best cities in the world for cycling, Copenhagen, where he writes on his successful cycling blogs (<http://www.copenhagenize.com>) and owns a consulting company that works with cities on how to build bicycle infrastructure and how to promote cycling.

Not coincidentally, Denmark is often ranked among the happiest countries in the world, as are other cities where lots of people get around by bike.

Colville-Anderson’s message:

- We need to make cycling the quickest form of transportation from A to B.
- Cycling needs to be promoted in a positive way. This means that we need to stop focusing on the [helmet issue](#). It makes people see cycling as a dangerous activity, which it isn't. The health benefits of cycling are 20 times greater than the risks involved. Instead of putting so much emphasis on helmet use, we need to look at the many positive sides of cycling and build better infrastructure.
- We need to stop ignoring the 'bull in the China shop': the automobile. It needs to be tamed. We need 30 km/h on all residential streets, and separated bike lanes on all arterials.
- We need to re-democratize our transportation system and make it equitable for all.

With regard to the sometimes less than stellar reputation of 'cyclists' in North America, he stated that "good design breeds good behaviour."

If we build good infrastructure, you'll see the behaviour of people on bikes improve.

The best way to do it right is by learning from the mistakes made by others and from success stories elsewhere, and copy the types of infrastructure that work, instead of trying to re-invent the wheel.

At the conclusion of the conference, the 'Charter of Vancouver' was presented. This charter, signed by European Cycling Federation President Manfred Neun and a host of delegates, ties into the United Nations 1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child. Signatories commit to call for the adoption of goals, policies and practices toward cycling, to further recognize and promote the rights of children.

In the past 30 years, the number of kids walking or biking to school has decreased from 82 per cent to 14 per cent worldwide. In Canada, on average, two per cent of kids presently bike to school.

Who can argue against safer cities for children?

"If it's not good enough for a child, it's not good enough," Peñalosa said.

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