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OPINION

Shoppers on bikes good for business

Patrons arriving by bicycle and on foot spend more money than those coming by car

May 21, 2009 04:30 AM

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ALBERT KOEHL

History provides many examples of famous associations: Romeo and Juliet, rum and coke, ice and hockey – but what about bicycles and business? This combination certainly has a nice ring to it, but until recently merchants and politicians have associated dollar signs with cars. And yet, there are signs that the times – and the thinking – are changing. The recent proposal by City of Toronto staff for a bike lane on busy Bloor St. is one such sign.

Merchants like to see a steady flow of people near their stores because people spend money. Typically – or so the popular wisdom used to go – this flow of people will arrive in cars, which city planners normally call "traffic." Traffic, however, is not only powered by car motors, but also by pedals, feet or transit vehicles. The objective, unless you own a parking lot, is to attract the largest possible number of people – not the largest number of cars. Some planners are beginning to understand the distinction.

A recent report by the Clean Air Partnership about Bloor St. in the Annex found that only 10 per cent of patrons at local businesses arrive by car and that patrons arriving by foot and bicycle spend the most money each month. The report also noted that about 20 per cent of spaces in nearby parking lots were empty even during peak periods. Finally, the report's survey found that more merchants than not believed that wider sidewalks or bike lanes would increase business. (Patrons preferred the bike lane option by a ratio of four to one.)

CAP's report suggests one rather obvious conclusion: bringing a single 70 kilogram shopper to a store in a 1,400 kilogram vehicle is a cumbersome route to success. By contrast, about half a dozen bikes can fit in the space of a single car. And since bikes can stop faster than cars, the amount of space between bikes can be small, which means far more shoppers on bikes can fit onto our roads than shoppers in cars.

The report will be no surprise to people in Europe, where the level of cycling in cities – even those at similar latitudes – dwarfs that of Toronto. In Copenhagen and Amsterdam, about 30 per cent of people cycle to work compared to only 1 per cent in Toronto. Our city spends a lot of money promoting cycling, but not so much on actually making cycling safe. The reason residents consistently give for not cycling is the lack of bike lanes (only 95 kilometres on a 5,600-kilometre road network) – a problem that no amount of advertising promotion will solve.

In the 1960s, Copenhagen created the world's longest pedestrian street despite resistance from shop owners. Commerce, however, did not suffer. In fact, providing access to cyclists and pedestrians resulted in an ideal shopping environment – without cars. Sales increased.

More recent studies from Bern, Switzerland, show that parking space devoted to bikes generates more business than an equal amount of space devoted to cars. A study in Munster, Germany, found that cyclists buy fewer goods on each trip but spend more overall in the course of a greater number of trips.



MOLLY MOORE/WASHINGTON POST PHOTO

In the Netherlands, a commuter unlocks her bike at the Amsterdam Central train station's bicycle garage. About 30 per cent of the people in Amsterdam cycle to work compared to only 1 per cent in Toronto.

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The old way of thinking may be based on the notion that car drivers, because they arrive in expensive machines, have lots of money to spend. The opposite may be true. A motorist, on average, spends \$10,000 annually to own and operate a car, which leaves less money for shopping. Certainly the money that is spent on parking cannot be spent in local stores. And a 2001 City of Toronto report found that the percentage of cyclists who come from households with an annual income over \$80,000 is more than double the percentage of non-cyclists from such households.

A neighbourhood with more bikes and fewer noisy cars is also a far more pleasant place to shop. Bikes may not be an attractive alternative during the coldest months (although the Yukon and Northwest Territories have higher cycling to work rates than Toronto), but cycling and mass transit are a good complement for each other.

Bikes are also good for individual pocketbooks and the public purse:

First, bike makers aren't begging for handouts from the taxpayer. While automakers want money to create cars and more money to create buyers (through government-facilitated financing), the rate of bike manufacturing continues to climb steeply around the world – and now outstrips car manufacturing by about three to one.

Second, bikes can help reduce congestion because they need a fraction of the space of cars to move the same number of people. According to our chamber of commerce, motor vehicle congestion currently costs the Greater Toronto Area \$1.8 billion each year.

Third, bikes cause less wear and tear on pavement and less property damage while cyclists contribute more than their fair share to the road infrastructure through their taxes. Car drivers only contribute a portion of the real cost of maintaining the road system.

Finally, bikes are part of the solution to air pollution and global warming. Motor traffic pollution causes 440 deaths in Toronto alone each year and more than \$2 billion in mortality-related costs. Emissions of air pollutants and greenhouse emissions from even 1 million bikes (the total number of Toronto adults who ride a bike) would be zero – a level that not even the most advanced car technologies will ever meet.

Shopping by bike may not have the same potential in every neighbourhood, but the presumption that bikes and business don't go together is worth challenging at every turn. It's certainly time for Canadians to start thinking about a new word association in our culture: bikes and business.

Albert Koehl is an environmental lawyer and founding member of Bells on Bloor, which organizes an annual bike parade on Bloor St. www.bellsonbloor.ca

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RE: Can bike during the Winter

I did some research about temps in Oslo and Helsinki are as cold as Toronto, Copenhagen and Stockholm have temperatures which are considerably warmer, please bring statistics that show Oslo and Helsinki are bike riding. In my poorer days I HAD to ride a bike as I worked early mornings in area where there was no bus service, I still have that Norco BMX bike that got me to work at Burger King at 5:30 AM in January, I was a strapping young lad on a BMX bike it was not fun I remember when it was snowing you cannot ride your bike period. When the snow was cleared there were snow banks on the side of the road, there were ice patches, IT WAS DANGEROUS, but I was young and poor, It was either start the walk 30 minutes early or bike, but I was young and stupid, what is your excuse?

Submitted by sam villa at 6:39 PM Thursday, May 21 2009

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Why Is It That...?

Whenever somebody makes a comment, it is assumed that you have to buy the whole enchilada in the other direction? If that is what you call a well researched article, then I pity your English teacher. That was basically my comment. You could call it - Why Bikes are Good for Toronto and list five reasons. Bike lanes are hardly painting a yellow line. Pavement needs to be repaired and sewer grates reconfigured. Toronto cyclists are notorious for not obeying traffic rules and regulations and riding on the sidewalk. The Europeans are much better at this and use the roads. Plus, as someone else pointed out, it is nearly impossible to use a bike here in winter.

Submitted by Wallhouse Wart at 6:25 PM Thursday, May 21 2009

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Can bike during the Winter

Every time I see a comment on how cycling in Toronto is not practical because of cold weather, it makes me laugh. Cities like Oslo, Helsinki, Copenhagen and Stockholm are as cold or even colder than Toronto and yet, cyclism is rampant in these cities all year round. We Canadians like to think we're tough, but when it comes to Winter there are so many wimps out there, it's pathetic. I bike all year round (and I do have a car) and as long as you're smart and prepared, cold is not an issue. Winter is part of the true Canadian psyche. In my book, if you don't fully embrace it, you're a pure excuse of a Canadian...

Submitted by SydneyCarton at 1:59 PM Thursday, May 21 2009

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RUN THE EXPERIMENT

This is all going to be hypothetical until some city somewhere installs bike lanes, cordons off the downtown to cars; probably in conjunction with enhanced rail service (which would carry bikes, and parcels). The province could get involved by running a bike lane down a major highway from Windsor to Ottawa, including Algonquin Park, and through Toronto. It would encourage cycle-tourists, more inter-city bike traffic, and serve as a break-down lane. It only needs to be on one side of a highway, which reduces costs. A form of regional development that pays multiple dividends.

Submitted by MLFOREVER at 1:05 PM Thursday, May 21 2009

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Have no fear

This will be discussed for a minimum 5-10 years and the end result will be a typical Toronto half-baked poorly implemented non-solution. In the meantime, cities such as New York, Montreal, Chicago will continue to invest heavily in cycling infrastructure leaving Toronto far behind in their 21st century wake. Shiny ugly condos are Toronto's answer to everything.

Submitted by Ducon at 11:23 AM Thursday, May 21 2009

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@Wallhouse Wart

Yes, you're right, bikes are indeed more popular in Europe because European cities, for the most part, were built for people and not cars. The reason distances are shorter in Europe is because we North Americans bought into the idea of suburbia and everything is spread out. As for more accidents, statistics in Europe show that increased bike use did not cause an increase in accidents, if anything the opposite happened. As for making bike lanes, how much does it cost to paint a line along a road? I think not much. To maintain? Bikes don't damage the roadway like cars do. The problem is that people in this city are car addicts and refuse to acknowledge their addiction. Lets admit we have a problem and start a 12 step program towards recovery. We need more walking, more transit, more cycling and less driving. To do this we need to have drivers pay the real cost of driving and build denser.

Submitted by SydneyCarton at 11:09 AM Thursday, May 21 2009

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What a load of Drivel

Well maybe the delivery people that supply the stores should revert back to push carts. That would make the "Bells on Bloor" even happier. When there is almost non compliance to the rules of the road by cyclist they will become more "door prizes" in the City. The one thing I think is really funny, the fact that many motorist avoid driving in the curb lane because of its poor condition in part caused by of all things, the city bus. Funny too is the fact that so many cyclist ride on the sidewalk because the bicycle lane is too dangerous, like along the bloor viaduct. Awww, I guess the great shopping cyclist divide 30 litres of top soil into 5 litres packages to take it home on the bicycle. Or maybe, just maybe they use thir car.

Submitted by kinkchaser at 10:59 AM Thursday, May 21 2009

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Cant wait to drive my bike in Nov/Dec/Jan/Feb/Mar/Apr

I can't wait to drive my bike in minus 5 degrees, I can't wait to navigate huge piles of snow, I cant wait to glide over ice, I can't wait for the blistering wind to aid my ride, I can't wait to drive my bike in the 18 hours of dark. What a brilliant idea, I mean it works in moderate climate zones so it should work here! Thank God for bureacrats and ivory tower elitists telling us lowly peasants how we the ignorant should live our lives!

Submitted by sam villa at 10:42 AM Thursday, May 21 2009

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re : what a load of

There are plenty of short distance trips in the city of Toronto. I live in the Junction and I can travel easily by bike to each and every one of the unique communities in Toronto and the GTA. I however, made a choice to live in the city where I can bike anywhere I need to. I am not sure how wallhouse wart can say there is no research in the article...Several facts were researched and the author gave us several statistics. Are you saying that it would be better for gridlock to maintain the parking lane on each side of bloor street? Whenever I ride by cars in the Annex, traffic isn't moving. Obviously you are anti bike with no research to back up your opinion!

Submitted by taitai at 10:24 AM Thursday, May 21 2009

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Just another example of the BS from the anti car lobby!

Just another example of the BS from the anti car lobby!

Submitted by realtycoon at 9:57 AM Thursday, May 21 2009

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Bike Shoppers

I bike to the Danforth all the time for the thing I need - I make more trips because I can carry less, but that makes for more shopping - and no Parking Tickets!

Submitted by Seymore Bikes at 8:56 AM Thursday, May 21 2009

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Cherry picking facts

When it comes to bikes in cities only facts which support the writers position are shown. True, In Amsterdam there are lots of Bikes. This is because this city is small and has virtually NO parking. Not because of some tree hugger taking the parking away but because there is just NO place to put parking. Of course you have to go there to see the reality. They also have lots of bike lanes. These lanes are on the Sidewalks so those who walk have limited space to move. Until recently bikes were given extraordinary rights because the city wanted to encourage their use but because most of the riders are so arrogant and irresponsible in the operation of their vehicle their rights have recently been drastically reduced. Bottom line is unless you have the chance to travel to places like this and see for yourself what REALLY happens you have to depend on the biased opinions that appear in our media.

Submitted by blogexpert at 8:56 AM Thursday, May 21 2009

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