

Shoppers on bikes good for business

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

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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.



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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.

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.

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.

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