

The war on the car, as seen from the bicycle seat



By Chelsea Murray, National Post

Last month New York City [closed the Times Square portion of Broadway to traffic](#). The thoroughfare is now home to [pedestrians, cafe tables and chairs](#). No cars allowed.

Critics say such an ambitious anti-car move in one of North America's most congested cities makes Toronto's own war on the car look quite small. While New York gives five blocks of Manhattan, where 50,000 cars used to drive every day, over to pedestrians and cyclists, Toronto hosts a shouting match over a few lanes of traffic.

But change may be coming to this city as well. Recently, Mayor David Miller unveiled the city's first bike parking lot at Union Station, city

council added bike lanes to Jarvis despite an uproar, and the TTC committed to increasing the number of bus routes with bike racks. It all begs the question: could Toronto's car culture be fading?

"Cities reserve the right and deserve the right to say hey, you know what? That wasn't a good idea 20 or 30 years ago and we should fix it," said Councillor Adrian Heaps, chair of the Toronto Cycling Committee, alluding to the waterfront-barrier Gardiner Expressway and industrial portlands.

"And our population is expanding. Fifty-thousand people every year move into this city, so we have to accommodate people in a finite space and move them around in an orderly fashion and we can't just look at a car as the only option."

As of the last census (2006) the number of adults cycling to work increased 30% from 2001. Those driving decreased about 2%.

City council was also supposed to announce a feasibility study for a Bloor-Danforth bike lane, running east-west from Scarbrough to Etobicoke, on June 3.

But just as cycling enthusiasts were preparing for a victory lap, the study was put on hold so that a third-party consultant could meet with the public and weigh the costs a bike lane would have on businesses along the route. (The lanes were not in the original Toronto Bike Plan, but are on the table now because so many cyclists use the corridor and want to use it more safely.)

"Bloor and Danforth probably represent this city in a microcosm. It's ethnodiversity, it's transit in some ways, it's the history of Toronto and the future of Toronto," he said. "So all that has to be taken into account. You can't just paint a white line down there indiscriminately, you have to have to be sensitive to the businesses that have been there and the communities on either side of it."

Those communities are now split. Bike activists who have been lobbying for this route for years are frustrated with what they say is a patchwork cycling network.

On May 31, Bells on Bloor held its annual ride from High Park to Queen's Park in support of the stalled bike lane. The group has been organizing Bloor rides since September, 2007, while fellow cycling group Urban Repair Squad resorts to more direct forms of protest.

URS uses grassroots, guerilla-style tactics and paints de facto bike lanes all over the city (especially on Bloor) to garner public attention. The lanes are usually removed by city staff, but one URS symbol — a penny-farthing bike under two "sharrows" — painted over a year ago near Ossington Avenue and Dupont Street remains untouched.

“There are a lot of people involved who have been at it for 10 or 15 years, advocating for change. And they keep getting told no... we beg to differ” said Martin Reis (pictured above), URS photographer and Web site organizer. “We can say yes, it can be done. It can be done for next to nothing.”

But not everyone along Bloor is thrilled with the possibility of such an expansive bike lane. Briar de Lang, general manager of the Bloor-Yorkville BIA, agrees with the city’s decision to put the project on hold, “Such a massive endeavour needs more study,” she said, suggesting the city instead look at putting the lanes on Adelaide and Richmond.

The executive director of the Greektown BIA, Faiza Ansari, worries bike lanes would replace parking and slow business on the Danforth — and also hopes the city looks for an alternate route with a slower stream of traffic.

“Let’s face it, in this economic time, small business is struggling, absolutely struggling,” she said. “And if all of those small businesses were to actually close then that has a huge negative effect on the city in the long run and our city won’t be as vibrant and nobody will want to come whether they’re in cars or on bikes.”

Critics call Mr. Miller’s transit- and bicycle-related measures a “war on the car.” Mr. Heaps insists Toronto is not facing a cycling insurgency, but a disagreement over how Canada’s largest city should evolve.

“Cycling is not an epidemic in the city, it’s a transportation option,” he said and then reiterated, “It’s not a religion, it’s a transportation option.”

— *With files from Danna Zabrovsky*