

BC on the Move: Planning the Path to Health

by Heidi Redman and Cara Fisher

Planning our cities for active transportation means shifting walking and cycling from the marginalized to the mainstream.

“Active transportation is the only form of transport that satisfies all attributes of a sustainable transportation system. It includes walking, cycling, using a wheelchair or mobility aids, in-line skating or skateboarding.”¹

Introduction

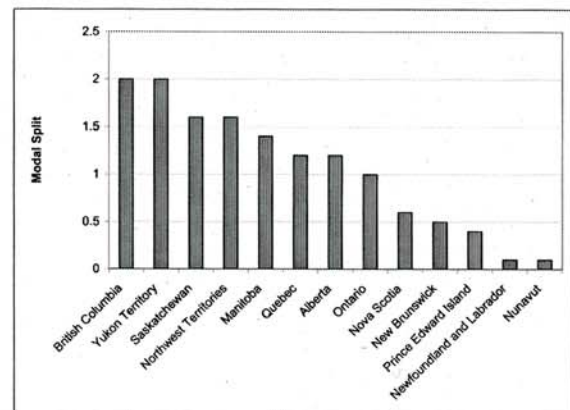
The good news is that British Columbians are leading Canada in physical activity. BC is Canada's most active province – 59% of residents over 12 are physically active enough to achieve health benefits². Victoria lays claim to the highest cycling modal share³ in Canada, and the City of Vancouver was voted 2008 Best Walking City in Canada by the Canadian Federation of Podiatric Medicine⁴. The bad news is, there is still a lot to do. Despite these accolades, lack of physical activity in our daily lives continues to impact obesity rates in our province. We need to increase the amount of *routine* physical activity we engage in to truly make a difference. Planning our cities to better support active transportation modes such as walking and cycling offers a way to increase the amount of routine physical activity that is a part of our daily lives. In this arena, Europe is leaving us in the dust. While our province is leading the country in terms of cycling, even the *most* cycling oriented cities in North America (Vancouver, Victoria, Portland and Seattle) have lower bike modal shares than the least bike oriented cities in the Netherlands, Germany, and Denmark⁵. Many barriers have been cited as to why active transportation has been slower to catch on in Canada:

- **It's too cold here! (Climate)** In fact, Copenhagen has a lower average daily temperature than Vancouver, and less average sunlight hours⁶. In spite of our colder climate, Canadians cycle about three times more than Americans⁷. Routine maintenance of route surfaces (including plowing of bike lanes and sidewalks in winter) can help overcome the barriers posed by weather.
- **Europe has been like that forever! (Culture)** Most people assume that bicycling levels in Europe have always been high. In fact, the increase in cycling modal share in Northern Europe has occurred in the last 15–35 years. Like Canada and the US, these countries continue to have high levels of car ownership but walking and cycling have become a mainstream way of getting around for day-to-day activities⁸.

- **Walking and cycling are too dangerous! (Safety)** As levels of cycling increase the number of cycling fatalities decreases. Long term data suggests that there is “safety in numbers” – in places where cycling is more mainstream, and prioritized over cars, cycling injuries have dropped. The Netherlands has an extremely low injury and fatality rate, especially compared with the USA and Canada. Safety concerns can be a deterrent for everyone, but especially for children and seniors.

Climate, culture and safety are important considerations, but they should not determine the fate of cycling. Active transportation is the only mobility solution that addresses the combined goals of healthy active living and sustainable transportation. A shift in thinking is required to reposition walking and cycling. We need to give priority to providing transportation choices for *people*, instead of giving the green light to the private car. So while cycling and walking are also a means of recreation and exercise, it is important to examine the value of commuting – with an emphasis on rationale and measures that promote these forms as an attractive means of getting from one place to another.

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Modal Split of Workers Bicycling to Work in Canadian Provinces and Territories (2001) Source: Statistics Canada, 2003

Rationale for Change

Provincial and local government, community leaders, and decision makers can support active transportation planning while achieving a number of other goals as well:

- **Mitigate climate change.** Replacing car trips with walking or cycling greatly reduces the contribution of transportation to air pollution, and improves air quality. Road transport is responsible for over 40% of discharges of suspended particles into the atmosphere.
- **Champion sustainability.** Integrating active transportation into a city is a way to tie social, economic, environmental, and quality of life goals for a community together.
- **Foster a healthy society.** In Canada, an estimated \$2.1 billion in annual health care costs can be directly attributed to physical inactivity⁹. Extensive research shows that a poorly built environment affects physical inactivity levels – downstream this can lead to a host of chronic illnesses such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and hypertension.
- **Consider the economic rationale.** Walking and cycling facilities cost less than infrastructure for cars and transit, and less land is required for these facilities. Active transportation also needs to be seen as an economic contributor. The Galloping Goose Regional Trail in the Capital Regional District is a commuter route as well as a tourist draw.
- **Promote social equality.** Alternative transportation is cheap and therefore more widely accessible and equitable than the private automobile. By creating cities that are made for walking and cycling we create cities that are socially sustainable and “made for people¹⁰.”

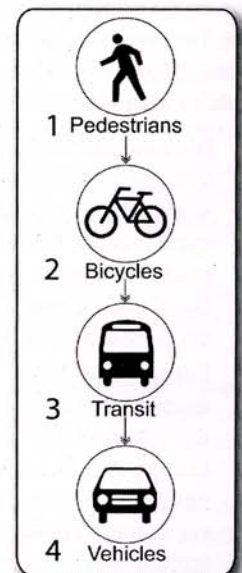
Key Policies: Lessons from Europe and the United States

It is time to plan and engineer sustainability and physical activity back into our daily lives. Land-use and transportation planning need to reflect a holistic and comprehensive approach to community building that makes cycling and walking safe and convenient for everyone. Recent research on active transportation has highlighted the success of certain European and American cities in designing for pedestrians and cyclists. Here are some key policy measures that support active transportation¹¹:

- **Provide separate facilities for pedestrians and cyclists.** On heavily traveled roads, and at busy intersections people want a space that is reserved and designed for them. Separated facilities (paths on major streets separated by a barrier, or paved off-street paths), and traffic calmed residential streets marked as bike routes are the cornerstones of a safe and convenient network¹². In the ideal situation, pedestrians, bicycles and cars all have separate facilities.
- **Rethink intersections and traffic signals.** Assess major thoroughfares and intersections for safe crossing. Enhance street design by putting roadways on a ‘road diet’.
- **Mandate traffic calming.** Plan for the eight and the eighty year old. Improving conditions for children and seniors means streets are safer for all road users.
- **Provide bike parking and end of trip facilities.** Cyclists, like drivers, want access to convenient and secure bicycle parking. Introduce bylaws that regulate the number, location and design of bicycle parking at new developments.
- **Coordinate with public transport.** Connecting alternate transportation networks and modes gives people more travel choices.

- **Provide education and training.** Comprehensive traffic education and training programs should be available to both cyclists and motorists. Promotional events offer a great opportunity to generate enthusiasm and public support for cycling.
- **Introduce traffic laws.** Make car use expensive and less convenient through taxes and restrictions on owning, driving and parking a car.
- **Increase data collection.** Sound data is needed to back it up – create new data collection procedures to track how well the streets are serving all users. Traffic counts on number of users, routes, number of injuries, etc. can be used to make the case for improvements.
- **Promote compact mixed-use development.** Land-use planning that supports higher densities creates neighbourhoods with easy walking and cycling access to shopping and work.
- **Mandate “complete streets”.** Complete streets are designed, built, and maintained for pedestrians, bicyclists, transit riders and motorists in that order. Users of all ages and abilities should be able to safely move along and across a complete street.

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Hierarchy of transportation modes on a “complete street”.

BC on the Move (cont'd)

It should be emphasized that the above policies are a set of mutually reinforcing practices: each supports the other. With a few exceptions, rigorous application of many of these policies (such as separation of bicycle facilities and increased restrictions on the car) has not happened – they are either not yet politically acceptable, or have received little support. Others, however, such as compact mixed-use development, and neighbourhood traffic calming are being applied across BC as a part of normal planning activities.

Convergence of Sectors

A growing body of evidence-based research that proves the built environment impacts activity levels has brought divergent sectors together as part of the “war” on obesity. Physical inactivity is estimated to cost the BC health care system \$211 million a year in direct costs (including hospital, physician, drug, institutional and other costs)¹³.

In many communities, coalitions made up of planners, engineers, health professionals, educators, elected officials, and concerned citizens are joining forces. In places such as Kitimat, Quesnel and Burns Lake this has happened through the development of “Healthy Community” or “Active Community” Councils. Within government, a combined interest to get people more physically active has resulted in new intersectoral collaboration at a number of levels. The creation of the new Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport in June 2008 is a reflection of the increased priority placed on active living.

(Re-)Aligning with the Health Profession

Historically, planners and public health professionals have worked together. In the 19th century public health depart-

ments across Canada were part of municipal and regional planning departments. This partnership arose from the need to address community health issues arising from industrialization.

Today, planning and public health are brought together once again in the fight against chronic disease. Seeking allies in the health sector may seem at odds today as these professions typically work apart from one another. What can a public health professional offer to a planner? In many communities health officers review all new development plans, meaning they can be an ally in supporting the development of bicycle and pedestrian facilities. They bring credibility and health data to the table, which can aid in making the case for active transportation.

In addition, health advocates are often skilled at working in and facilitating multi-disciplinary teams. They do so in working to maintain clean water supplies, or contain disease outbreaks and thus can be valuable allies when multiple sectors come together. Public health professionals can be advocates (and partners) for bicycle and pedestrian friendly communities once the health connection is made.

With comprehensive planning practices that prioritize walking and cycling, and the successful collaboration of concerned sectors, BC could be on the path to better facilities for active transportation. The result? More citizens on the move...

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¹ City of Calgary, “Plan It Calgary, Active Transportation: Walking and Cycling”, July 2008, p.31.

² Canadian Community Health Survey, 2005.

³ Modal share describes the percentage of travellers using a particular type of transportation.

⁴ The City of Vancouver’s Transportation Plan, which makes walking one of the top transportation priorities, was cited as one of the factors contributing to Vancouver’s award.

⁵ Pucher, J. “Making Cycling Irresistible: Lessons from the Netherlands, Denmark and Germany,” *Transport Reviews*, July 2008, 28:4, p.497.

⁶ BBC Weather, www.bbc.co.uk/weather, accessed August 22, 2008.

⁷ Pucher, J. “Why Canadians cycle more than Americans: A comparative analysis of bicycling trends and policies,” *Transport Policy*, November 2005, p.265.

⁸ Pucher, J. “Making Cycling Irresistible: Lessons from the Netherlands, Denmark and Germany,” *Transport Reviews*, July 2008, 28:4, p.501.

⁹ Katzmarzyk, P., Gledhill, N., & Shephard, D. “The Economic Burden of Physical Activity in Canada”, *CMAJ*, 2004, 163 (11), 1435-40.

¹⁰ Peñalosa, Gil. “Walking, Bicycling and Public Spaces: Experiences from Bogota and Beyond.” Lecture. Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, August 20, 2008.

¹¹ Adapted from Pucher, J. “Making Cycling Irresistible: Lessons from the Netherlands, Denmark and Germany”, *Transport Reviews*, July 2008, 28:4, p.512.

¹² For a discussion on preferred types of bicycle routes see the Cycling in Cities research program “Opinion Survey.” University of British Columbia, 2008. Available at <http://www.cher.ubc.ca/cycling-incities/survey.html>

¹³ Coleman, R., Walker S. “The Cost of Physical Inactivity in BC.” GPI Atlantic, 2004, p.iii. Available at <http://www.health.gov.bc.ca/prevent/pdf/inactivity.pdf>.