



FASTFACTS



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Commuting by Bicycle in Winnipeg: A Challenge Indeed

Now that the warm weather is finally upon us, our streets are alive again with people riding bicycles, getting exercise and fresh air. This week more than 9,000 Manitobans will participate in Commuter Challenge, an initiative to encourage more people to use sustainable forms of transportation, including bicycles, to get to work or school. Coordinated by Resource Conservation Manitoba and sponsored by the three levels of government among others, Commuter Challenge offers encouragement for people to cycle one week per year.

However the barriers to cycling to work or school also need to be addressed so that people will consider this sustainable mode of transportation on a regular basis. A large part of the reason that Winnipeggers do not ride bicycles is because of a lack of infrastructure like bike lanes and safe places to secure or lock bicycles. Our municipal government needs to take action and develop an inclusive plan to make cycling safe and enjoyable.

Why? Because we know there are many benefits to making Winnipeg a bicycle-friendly city. It's great for our personal health and our environment. Vehicles are the largest source of greenhouse gases in Manitoba, and no wonder, nine

out of ten cars have only one occupant during rush hour traffic. Cyclists do not use oil, one of the most fought over resources on the planet; witness the war in Iraq and the conflict in Nigeria. For economical Winnipeggers, cycling is one of the cheapest ways to get around – no cost for fuel or parking. Plus it's a pleasure to fly along on a bike, you interact with the world in a completely different way than if you are in a car. Indeed research has found that 40% of Winnipeggers would ride their bikes to work or school if proper infrastructure was in place.

But current amenities for cyclists in Winnipeg are patchy. The Cyclist's Map of Winnipeg traces commuter routes, however most are through high traffic areas without designated bicycle lanes. City road signs telling motorists and cyclists to "share the road" are a stopgap solution; any cyclist will tell you it's not safe sharing the road with cars who may or may not notice bicycles. The danger is real: three cyclists die in Manitoba annually, and many more are injured.

In recent years the City has made minor changes such as diamond lanes for use of bikes and buses on a handful of downtown streets. Expanded multi-use pathways along riverways are



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used by many cyclists, and street closures on Lyndale, Scotia, Wellington, and Wolseley streets continue to be popular on Sundays and holidays. However these are not offered every day, and there are no continuous bicycle routes through the city.

What is our municipal government doing to address cyclist's needs?

The City of Winnipeg's Active Transportation Study was adopted by City Council in January 2006. However none of the 36 recommendations have been acted on to date. The report traces a clear path to improving Winnipeg's active transportation, defined as anything self-propelled: cycling, walking, skate-boarding or in-line skating. The report recommends Winnipeg catch up to other modern cities by incorporating cycling lanes and routes in all transportation infrastructure, developing a network for active transportation, and creating an active transportation strategy with a staff position and authority to move the plan forward.

The study compares Winnipeg with municipal government cycling policies elsewhere. Winnipeg can learn a great deal from what other municipalities have done to improve conditions for cyclists. Cities like Moncton, Toronto, Ottawa, Edmonton, Calgary, and Victoria have bicycle plans, which map out a public process to ensure infrastructure for cycling. For example, to accommodate cyclists on roads, Victoria has narrowed lanes for automobiles to make room for a dedicated bicycle lane. They have also created "bike boxes" at main intersections to allow bicycles to go to the front of a queue at red lights safely. Minneapolis now has bicycle racks on all buses to enable people to bus and cycle to work. Ottawa produces information on bicycle routes in partnership with local non-profit groups. Portland has a certified program where low income children learn safe cycling practices and earn their first bicycle. All of the above are funded from municipal budgets, and future spending for Canadian municipalities could come from cities dedicating a portion of the federal gas tax revenue to bicycles.

A public process for cyclists to be heard and have input into city planning is key. In the absence of a participatory process and recognition by the City of Winnipeg on the significance of cyclists, bikes are claiming the streets in other ways, such as the Critical Mass ride the last Friday of every month. Critical Mass bike rides take place in cities all over the world to celebrate cycling and demonstrate bicycle's right to use the road. However the City's inability to respect cyclists' concerns and needs was exemplified in the rough police treatment of participants in the May 26th ride, and the detainment and arrest of eight people for violating the Highway Traffic Act. Is this treatment by police really necessary when all cyclists want is safe infrastructure?

Politicians and decision makers must realize that cyclists are not a fringe group. We are citizens, we are voters, and we are taxpayers. Bicycles have the same rights and responsibilities on the road as vehicles. It's time the City took bicycles seriously because, as those of us who participate in Commuter Challenge know, riding a bicycle is one of the best things you can do for yourself, our community and our environment.

- Molly McCracken

Molly McCracken is a consultant and a Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives – Manitoba Research Associate. This piece first appeared in the Winnipeg Free Press on Thursday June 8th, 2006

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