

## How bike-friendly is the Comox Valley?



By Comox Valley Record

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If Vancouver Island were a classroom for cycling, Victoria would be the star student.

The surrounding communities in the Capital Regional District would get passing grades.

And the communities to the north?

Most would be looking for ways to hide their report cards from their moms and dads.

But the question facing Island communities is not whether they could earn straight As from the cycling community. It is how much of a priority an A grade should be. With the limited resources communities have, how much time and effort does cyclefication deserve?

From the perspective of many cyclists, there are two Vancouver Islands.

If you cycle for fun, there is plenty of opportunity. The Island is dappled with many low-traffic, rural roads suitable for Sunday sojourns. Backwoods trails, old logging roads and mountain bike courses are plentiful for the adventure seeker. And several communities have put a lot of effort in recent years into developing multi-use hiking and biking trails.

But if you want to cycle for transportation, in most major Vancouver Island towns you are probably left wanting more.

At least that's the verdict from Leo Boon, a Vancouver Island-based cycling advocate and director with the B.C. Cycling Coalition.

"If we apply European standards to the communities on Vancouver Island we would be handing out nothing but Fs except an E for Victoria," Boon said.

In the opinion of Boon and other cycling advocates, too many communities lack the cycling infrastructure and culture to make going from point A to point B a comfortable ride.

The main streets are full of cars moving too fast, and they lack safe cycling spaces.

Many cyclists in the Comox Valley echo these sentiments.

Quieter designated bike routes are scarce, as are bike-friendly facilities at destinations. Public cycling education and promotion initiatives — for both riders and non-riders — are infrequent. Bike-friendly laws and bylaws are not a priority and their enforcement is spotty at best.

“You need a bike network so you have an easy way to get into town; designate certain streets as bike lanes,” Boon said.

“Cars need to go 30 or 40 kilometres per hour, not 40 or 50. It doesn’t mean you have to pull up the street, just put down some lines, or planters.”

The process of cyclefication is already underway in Greater Victoria through the Capital Regional District Pedestrian and Cycling Master Plan.

Under this ambitious document, the CRD hopes to elevate its amount of regular cyclists to 15 per cent of the population — and up to 25 per cent in the most densely populated areas — by 2038.

To make this happen, it has endorsed a \$275-million, 775-kilometre cycling network, including 125 kilometres of multi-use trails and 650 kilometres of on-street lanes. The plan takes into account commuter patterns, the accessibility of common destinations, and transit tie-ins.

The cost is being lumped in with existing municipal roads, regional trails and provincial highways budgets and, ideally, fed through grant applications. The plan was adopted in 2011. More than one-half of the route is now complete.

Other Island communities have dabbled with bike lanes and cycling plans but only Greater Victoria has adopted a comprehensive plan based on the five Es of sustainable transportation — engineering, education, encouragement, enforcement and evaluation — and hired a co-ordinator to put it into action.

That co-ordinator, Sarah Webb, doesn’t argue when it is suggested she’s engaged in an experiment in social engineering.

The point of Victoria’s plan is to reduce traffic congestion and greenhouse gases by getting people out of their cars, and increase health by encouraging a more active lifestyle.

“Make it easier to choose cycling,” she said. “It’s a cost-effective solution to many of our problems. The cost of continuing to spend money on automobile infrastructure will only get higher.”

Others are less certain.

Courtenay Mayor Larry Jangula is not sure the taxpayer can afford a social engineering experiment.

It’s not that he doesn’t want to help cyclists, or see the positives of the cycling mantra for the greater community. It’s just that he is skeptical they will be felt as widely as advocates suggest. What works in Holland, or in a Mediterranean community, or even Victoria, won’t necessarily work elsewhere.

Weather, terrain, population density, people’s workplaces and daily schedules, their age, safety concerns — many factors are at play when residents decide whether cycling is a good option for them. He’s not convinced the cost of addressing them all is worth the return on investment.

“It’s not a one-size fits all. They don’t work for me and they don’t work for a lot of other people, but if you don’t believe it, you are a flat-earther,” he said.

He said while there is a group of activists lobbying hard for improvements, he is not hearing the same call from the larger community. From them he is hearing about the need to control costs and in that context cycling infrastructure looks like a significant investment to benefit a relatively small group.

“We’re pushed to spend more and more on it. We’re spending a disproportionate amount of money on cycling,” he said. “The reality is they are probably only one or two per cent (of how people commute).”

His estimate may not be far off.

At the implementation of its plan, the CRD pegged its cyclist community as one of the most active in the country at nine per cent of its population in some areas, and 3.2 per cent overall.

Industry studies used in Portland and Vancouver determined about a third of the general population will never be interested in riding — no way, no how. Seven or eight per cent are dedicated and enthusiastic cyclists ready to tackle the main roads. It’s the other 60 per cent of “interested but concerned” people that cycling advocates say can be encouraged to get out of their cars with the right infrastructure.

“When you build it, they will come,” Webb said.