

Step away from the car -- it's easy

Consider commuting options that are relatively inexpensive and healthier for you and the environment

BY STEVE CAREY, TIMES COLONIST JANUARY 10, 2010



Roger Taylor, 60, thinks older commuters might rule out riding a bike because they are intimidated by big hills. But with an electric bike, he says, riders can choose when to get some exercise and when to get a little help up an incline.

Photograph by: Debra Brash, Times Colonist, Times Colonist

During rush hour, I'm frustrated that carbon dioxide (and money) are pumping out my tailpipe as I sit, going nowhere, all alone. Last year, I worked at a job that required me to have two workplaces. I commuted from downtown to Saanich on a regular basis.

It felt terrible to fire up my thirsty V-8 and haul only myself, so I turned to daily public transportation. An understanding employer, a 10-minute walk, a surprisingly relaxing bus ride -- during which I read my newspaper -- and I was door-to-door for only \$2.50.

Commuting sustainably is something we can do easily, not just to save money, but to decongest our cities, clean our air and better the environment.

In the first in a two-part series on alternative commuting, I touch on bicycles and electric bikes, and gas and electric scooters. Next week, I'll talk transit, alternative fuels and dirty driving habits.

Bicycles

Growing up in Toronto, Susi Porter-Bopp had access to a great public transportation system. But as a teenager, she'd be out past 1:30 a.m., when everything stopped running. A bicycle was the best way for her, then 14, to get around. She purchased a Nishiki Apache road bike for \$400, and never regretted it.

Porter-Bopp, now 30, is a consummate commuter cyclist. She rides every day, rain, shine or snow.

"Victoria is a great place for commuter cycling, generally. The climate is very good; the weather is good; the culture is here," she says. "I have a sedentary job, and if I couldn't cycle every day, I would go absolutely nuts. Biking around, I can do it whenever I want, whatever time, I don't have to wait for a bus. I'm in control of how fast I get somewhere, when I get somewhere. It's so immediate and so easy."

For her daily commute, Porter-Bopp rides a Peugeot mountain bike, equipped with fenders and chopped, narrow handlebars for ease of navigating between cars. Her second bike is "a summer speed demon," a lightweight racing bike.

A frequent outdoor backpacker, Porter-Bopp bought a truck so she can get to out-of-the-way hiking and camping spots. To avoid in-town driving, Porter-Bopp purchased a small bicycle trailer so she can easily haul bulky items, like recycling or groceries.

Porter-Bopp has two problems with cycling: that there's a strong cycling culture among cyclists that doesn't extend to all commuters, including motorists; and she says that more safe spaces need to be dedicated to cycling, especially in downtown Victoria.

Darren Marr is president of The Greater Victoria Cycling Coalition, the largest cycling advocacy group in Victoria. Founded in 1991, the organization was instrumental in the creation of the Galloping Goose, getting bike lanes installed on Fort Street and other such projects. He says more bike lanes -- such as those on Blanshard from the arena to Beacon Hill Park -- are needed, as well as more bicycle parking, a huge amount of which was removed when the city replaced the old coin-operated parking meters with the new ticket-dispensing machines. Bikes can't be locked to the new posts safely, Marr says.

The coalition's primary project right now is safety on the Johnson Street Bridge.

"If you're coming from the Galloping Goose Trail, you've got two options: Either you go on the pathway, on the railroad tracks, and you've got to walk your bike along the tracks ... or you go on the bridge deck, and you have to merge with traffic," Marr says.

If automobile, cycling and pedestrian traffic could be separated, it would make life easier for everyone and encourage more people to cycle downtown, he says.

Porter-Bopp says she'll be a cyclist as long as her body is able to carry her.

"I feel lousy about a lot of things that we do in the world -- where we live, the amount of resources we consume, colonial history and all that. But biking is one of, if not the only thing I do that is sheer good. There is nothing wrong with cycling. I'm not hurting anyone; I'm just adding to my health and the decongestion of the city we live in," she says.

Electric bikes

Roger Taylor, 60, rides an eZee Bike electric bicycle, or e-bike, which includes a battery, a front-wheel drive system and Shimano hardware. Taylor paid about \$2,100 for the e-bike, although entry-level models sell for around \$1,600. Taylor was paying more than \$150 per month for parking before. In the time he's had the bike, it's paid for itself, he says.

Before Taylor bought an e-bike, he'd always driven a car and wasn't an avid cyclist. Now, he'll go for rides on his lunch break. He also cycles home with the electric assist off to get a workout.

"I come in in the mornings feeling alive and awake," Taylor says. "And when I do have to drive a car, I resent it. I'm in a car; I'm using gas; I'm paying for parking.

"I'm building up some of my courage and my clothing for the real wet days."

It takes Taylor roughly 12 minutes to ride his electric bike the five kilometres from his house to work. He tops up the battery every night, but if he needs to, he can pop it out and use a portable charger.

"I think older folks, like myself, who might be a bit intimidated, and thinking, 'I can't go up that hill,' they can turn on the electric assist, and then you're getting your exercise and getting up that hill, no problem," says Taylor. Taylor's wife also bought an e-bike at the same time, and the two ride together.

E-bike prices, bike components and battery quality vary from brand to brand. Consumers should do their research, comparing various bike brands, before making a choice.

Gas and electric scooters

Gas scooters use less, but still rely on, fossil fuel, which means they're a light shade of green. Scooters are more comfortable than a motorcycle or bike. Many have ample storage space under the seat. Scooters also don't have gears -- they're a twist-and-go system. The downsides include insurance costs and being directly in traffic with cars and trucks, unlike a bicycle or e-bike.

"Under 50cc scooters are great for around town commuting where you don't have to go on a highway. Top speed is 60 or 70 kilometers an hour," says Michael Stevulak of Scooter Underground, a store specializing in gas scooters, electric and folding bikes. The next class of scooter goes from 125cc up to 500cc and requires a motorcycle licence. Stevulak says these are more suited to commuters who need to travel at highway speeds.

Electric scooters are also available; however, many brands are prone to quality control issues with their batteries and controllers. Although the scooter shop has tested many brands, even the more reliable are hit and miss for quality, says Stevulak. An electric scooter's top speed is 32 km/h, and they travel 40 kilometres on a charge. They are classified as bicycles, and do not require insurance or a driver's license. As such, they are allowed in bike lanes and on the Galloping Goose. When electric

scooters are seen on the Galloping Goose, they are viewed with animosity, says Stevulak.

The future of electric scooters rests with higher-speed models, such as U.S.-based Vectrix's scooters, which require insurance and a motorcycle licence, the same as a gas scooter, says Stevulak. These can travel 100 km/h, and were tested by the New York City Police as a replacement for gas motorcycles. Transport Canada is examining regulations for these scooters, which are not yet allowed in Canada.

Another problem is parking. In cities like Toronto and Portland, scooters can be parked on the sidewalk. In Europe, scooters are parked in alleyways, or two to a parking space.

"We had a husband and wife buy two scooters from us. They drove them downtown, weren't sure of the rules and parked both at a meter. They came back and one had a ticket on it," says Stevulak. No matter what the method, he says that more parking is required to get people to adopt non-automobile transportation.

For more information on cycling advocacy in Victoria, e-bikes and scooters, read Steve Carey's blog at timescolonist.com/rethink.

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