

The Daily Gleaner

Green Matters for the Daily Gleaner, May 2, 2011

By Sonya Hull

Fredericton's Transformation to a Cycling City

"When man invented the bicycle he reached the peak of his attainments. Here was a machine of precision and balance for the convenience of man. And (unlike subsequent inventions for man's convenience) the more he used it, the fitter his body became. Here, for once, was a product of man's brain that was entirely beneficial to those who used it, and of no harm or irritation to others. Progress should have stopped when man invented the bicycle."

~ Novelist Elizabeth West, 1977

At the launch of the Harvest Jazz and Blues Festival's 2011 line-up last week, I wandered into a conversation amongst a group of women who were passionately discussing cycling – favourite routes, new bikes, how much less time it takes to bike to work than to drive and park. It was music to my ears and it reminded me of an H.G. Wells quote: "Cycle tracks will abound in Utopia."

Cycling as a mode of transportation is perhaps the most tangible example of sustainable living in action. Cycling is clearly a winner on all fronts – environmental, social and economic. The environmental benefits are clear: no emissions and a very small environmental footprint including bike production and shipping, and then routine maintenance. The personal health and fitness benefits are obvious; and the overall societal benefit is that more people on bikes means fewer cars, hence reduced traffic congestion and pollution. And when it comes to economic sustainability (on a micro level), more cycling means less money spent on gas, contributing to a healthier household financial bottom line.

A study published last year in the Journal of Urban Health found that "increased odds of bicycling were associated with less hilliness; higher intersection density; less highways and arterials; presence of bicycle signage, traffic calming, and cyclist-activated traffic lights; more neighborhood commercial, educational, and industrial land uses; greater land use mix; and higher population density; and, sometimes, sacrifices of our traditional life patterns and personal interests."

Fredericton has one obvious challenge here: hilliness! There are many brave souls who pedal up York Street, but remember there is always the busing option too. Fredericton transit buses have bike racks on the front so you can bus to work uptown and then bike home downhill or vice versa.

Guided by a Trails and Bikeways Master Plan, Fredericton is working hard at being a cycling friendly city: the trail system continues to expand with portions paved for smoother commuting around the city core; bike lane routes and "share the road" signage is increasing; and bike racks and lock-up options have expanded as well.

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Now we need the bike culture in our citizenry to grow. Studies show that due to urban traffic, cycling generally takes less time than driving for trips of 3 km or less, and about the same time for 5 km trips. And for longer trips, remember you save time by combining daily exercise with your commute. So now's the time to dust off your bike, throw your work shoes in a backpack, and pedal your way to Utopia!

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