

REGIONAL NEWS: Car culture shift needed to increase bike uses

Region's bike network taking shape

BY DAVID FLEISCHER
dfleischer@yrmg.com

Like most suburbs, York Region grew up in the age of the automobile, but regional councillors spent part of last week learning how to get people to trade four wheels for two.

"You can't go to another region and see what they did. You're going to be inventing this," Alta Planning and Design principal Jeff Olson told councillors, describing how to construct a viable network for pedestrians and cyclists.

Mr. Olson's New York firm has helped develop trail systems in cities such as Port-

land, Ore., and he emphasized the region is in a unique position to lead the charge.

The workshop emerged from discussions on how best to build bike lanes along busy regional corridors, such as Hwy. 7.

The road is a congested, high-speed route that isn't welcoming to cyclists, but it is expected to urbanize over the next 10 or 20 years, with bike lanes set to go in as soon as construction of Viva's bus lanes continues.

While the goal may be to have a shared road, the regional system seems to have been built for a different purpose, Markham Regional Councillor Gord Landon pointed out.

"It's a balancing act and I think there are ways to do things in between, during that transitional decade," Mr. Olson said.

What planners know to be safe might not make riders feel safe and it is crucial to create a comfortable environment, engineer John Robinson said.

That means focusing on engineering, education of riders, enforcement of traffic rules and constant evaluations of what works.

Mr. Olson showed a wide array of possibilities for bike lanes, ranging from painted lanes on existing roads to coloured lanes, lanes protected by buffers on either side and lanes segregated with concrete, for example.

It costs the region about \$7,000 a year to maintain a kilometre of road. That rises to \$8,000 with the addition of paint and signs. A complete physical separation could increase costs to \$28,000 a kilometre.

Context is crucial, Mr. Olson and Mr. Robinson emphasized, saying different treatments are appropriate for different environments.

While costs can seem daunting, Mr. Olson said Portland bike use rose from less than 1 per cent to 8 per cent of trips.

"The difference in a decade is we've gone from communities wondering why we should do this, to asking how we can do this best?" Mr. Olson said.

Some councillors wondered about how

to fundamentally change the suburban car culture and how to avoid the perception that there is a "war on cars".

Our weather is also a challenge and the region will bear the costs of adjusting snow removal strategies to ensure it's not dumped in bike lanes during winter, transportation commissioner Kathleen Llewellyn-Thomas said.

York adopted a pedestrian and cycling master plan in 2008, earmarking \$45 million over 10 years for updates, maintenance, education programs and other aspects of the network.

Studies found about an even split between those cycling for recreation and those using bikes to commute.

Less than 25 per cent of the cyclists surveyed felt safe on the road. Others complained about drivers going too fast, not signalling and not sharing the road.

They also complained routes were hard to find, there was no way to take a bicycle on transit and no safe place to leave it at a destination.

"A full-scale recognition of the opportunity for people who do road cycling to make full use of the regional system isn't really there yet," Newmarket Eagles Cycling Club president Andrew Darke said.

"There is a culture of cars versus bikes, in the sense that the primary objective (of road building) is to cater to cars."

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