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Geography 346

**Bike ability in Major North American Cities**

Increasing gas prices and a population with a greater environmental conscience have been the major driving force in exploring the reasons why people do and do not use cycling as a regular form of transportation. Many European cities have managed to adopt a lifestyle which encourages biking as a major form of transportation (Leblanc, 2006). North American cities have struggled to embrace the biking lifestyle for a number of social and geographical reasons. After extensive research both regionally and abroad; municipalities throughout North America are now taking steps to promote biking as a main source of transportation (City of Vancouver, 2012).

The most obvious problem which stands in the way of biking as transportation in North American cities is how cities have been planned and built. When colonies were first becoming established both in the United States and Canada (before they were countries) one of the main draws for prospective colonists was that there was so much land to be had it was almost being given away. Very little thought was put into conserving land or resources in the new world and the invention of the car only made the sprawl of North American cities even worse. North American culture is derived from its pride in being different from Europe. Being able to have large amounts of land and a car to drive long distances became a status symbol which contributed to why cities are not well suited for biking. In Europe where land has been at a premium for some time has cities which are much more compact and are populated by people who do not carry a social stigma with using cycling as the main method for transportation. As the economy has gone through ups and downs and a booming North American population began to see the need for biking, a new social problem has risen in promoting biking as a form of transportation. The younger generations of North Americans are less active than their European counterparts and many do not even know how to ride a bicycle properly. Growing up in a society where you drive or take a bus everywhere has made it very difficult for young people to wrap their head around the notion of using their own power to transport themselves around the city.

Vancouver is the main focus of this case study as there has been extensive research done at UBC on the topic as well as a number of initiatives being implemented by the city in order to increase bicycle commuting. There is an ongoing research project based out of UBC which has been examining a number of factors surrounding reasons for cycling and reasons why potential cyclists do not use cycling as a means of transportation (Bubul et al., 2012). Factors include safety, distance, scenery, weather, and bike path access. In 1999 a bike action plan was developed by the city of Vancouver in order to help deal with some of its traffic issues which were becoming more and more of an issue as the city continued to grow in population. The plan includes 12 action items which are hoped to increase cycling in Vancouver. The 12 action plans are: 1 create cycling maps, 2 create a biking network, 3 create a greenway program for recreational cyclists, 4 install bike racks throughout the city, 5 counting volume of bike traffic, 6 determine peak bike hours at high volume locations, 7 monitor traffic in high volume cycling areas and take remedial action where needed, 8 monitor vehicular accidents involving cyclist and take action where needed, 9 analyze crime statistics and ensure there is a continued lack of correlation between crime and the location of bike facilities, 10 develop the bicycle network to create pathways approximately 1 km apart, 11 enhance accommodation for cyclists on arterial streets wherever practical and provide for cyclists in new developments to allow safer cycling, 12 plan and construct a network of bike paths in the downtown core in conjunction with the downtown transportation plan (City of Vancouver, 2012).

The city of Vancouver is taking action to encourage increased bike commuting by initiating a bike share program. They are modelling the program after programs which were put in place in Toronto and Montreal (Bubul et al., 2012). There has been some delay in the initiative due to issues surrounding legislation in BC requiring adults to wear helmets when cycling. However there is great expectations for the Vancouver bike share program since surveyed potential users indicated that they would not only use the program in the summer but in the winter as well since Vancouver has relatively mild winters compared to Montreal and Toronto. The program would have stations set up around metro Vancouver which would serve as pay and service stations for the bikes. The stations would be set up in areas which would be considered destinations for a large percentage of potential bike users.

In addition to introducing the bike share program, the city of Vancouver is looking at creating more bike friendly routes. Since it is illegal to bike on sidewalks; clear bike lanes will be put in on major commuting routes to make commuting safer for cyclists. Where possible trails which are completely separate from the road will be put in place (City of Vancouver, 2012). The city of Vancouver has already put in over four hundred kilometers of bike paths to make commuting safer for cyclists. By the time the bike share program is in place there will be online route planners for cyclist in order for them to plan the best possible route for them to take which still keeps them on a safe path. Requests have been taken from bike users for bike lock stations to be put in at locations which would be most convenient for their bikes to be stored (City of Vancouver, 2012). Requests are still being taken and will be an ongoing process as older bike lock up locations is also being upgraded. In order to encourage safe cycling practices there will be instructional classes available at little cost. It was indicated by a number of surveyed participants that a lack of safe cycling knowledge would be a discouraging factor in themselves or their children biking regularly for a means of transportation. However most participants who took place in the survey did not feel that they would be comfortable cycling on roads amongst automobiles even if they were properly trained in road cycling etiquette (Bubul et al., 2012). The researchers concluded that the perceived risk of danger from cycling amongst automobiles would diminish as cycling became more common and drivers became more accustom to cyclist on the roads. The programs which Toronto and Montreal mirrored from France had also changed the some of the traffic laws to favour cyclists in any legal dispute involving accidents between automobile and cyclists. The threat to serious legal repercussions is thought to have a moderate impact on automobile driver’s attentiveness to surrounding cyclists.

One criticism of the initiatives taken by the city of Vancouver is a lack of programs to encourage a healthier lifestyle within the youth population. While the geographical and safety issues of cycling have been addressed, the social issues surrounding cycling have not been examined in detail by the UBC research program. Studies have shown that adults are much more likely to live an active lifestyle if they start active and healthy practices as a child or youth. However while the city of Vancouver does not directly take any initiatives to increase cycling amongst children and youth, they do support the Vancouver Area Cycling Coalition which does have a number of limited programs directed towards youth bike safety and bike to school week. Very little information was found in regards to how the program was being promoted to the schools. It appeared that it required a significant amount of teacher or administrative initiative at the individual schools in order to make the programs run (Kitchen & Raema, 2012).

Climate and demographics were also compared in the UBC research project to determine if the percentage of cyclists is more directly linked to the climate or the demographics of the region. It was found that demographics do play a key role in the number of cyclists; however freezing temperatures decreased the volume of cyclists significantly across the country regardless of demographics. This again gives more promise that the initiatives take by the city of Vancouver have a good chance of success due to the mild climate (Bubul et al., 2012).

The major action in the Vancouver plan to increase cycling is the bike share program which will not go into effect until 2013 so it is hard to compare the success of the program to other cities in North America which are attempting similar ventures. However it appears that Vancouver has moved through most of the red tape faster and with less opposition than in some American cities which have come up against more opposition for increased funding for bike friendly programs. Portland, Oregon is a model city for North American hubs which are trying to increase cycling commuting. The promoters of the Portland initiatives credit the success of their programs to the ideas not just being looked at as a way to get to and from work, but more a lifestyle to live by. Portland has a large demographic of young people who are more open to such changes rather than what is traditionally a more conservative demographic in Austin, Texas which has come up against more opposition to the idea of biking to work (Leblanc, 2006).

In conclusion, the trends shown by other cities in North America would indicate that Vancouver’s bike ability initiatives should be successful according to the current factors which have been researched. Further research outside of the UBC study has shown that there tends to more willingness to commute by bike if there is desirable scenery on the route and preferably on green pathways which are separated from busy roads. Vancouver would appear to have an ideal environment for creating a larger cycling culture which would help create a cleaner environment and reduce the amount of funds required to upkeep roads as automobile traffic would be reduced. Only time will tell if Vancouver will buy in to the initiatives being taken.

References

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