

Vancouver city hall's war on cars

A war is being waged in Vancouver's streets. Led by green-by-all-means Mayor Gregor Robertson, city hall has identified and vilified its enemy, the car. The private automobile.



NICK PROCAYLO / PNG Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson and his slate of left-leaning councillors are pushing an agenda to pester and drive out people who use cars, Brian Hutchinson writes, by introducing bike lanes into the downtown core, eliminating parking spots and installing a bike-share project.

The mayor doesn't own one. He prefers his bicycle. Since taking office eight years ago, Robertson and his slate of left-leaning councillors have introduced myriad bicycle lanes into the city's downtown core and other neighbourhoods, to the frustration of motorists, taxi drivers, shop owners, pedestrians and others. (And to the delight of residents of one publicly maintained street, which, thanks to its dedicated bike lane, is now a semi-private, local vehicles and bikes-only driveway, off limits to the taxpaying hoi polloi.)

Some of the city's new traffic-clogging, business-blocking lanes are seldom used, but that's of little concern to two-wheeler preachers and sanctimonious scolders who aren't dependent on cars for their livelihoods. More dedicated bike lanes are on the way.

Planning a move to Vancouver's West End, a densely populated, mostly working-class neighbourhood wedged between the downtown core and beloved Stanley Park? Better think twice about bringing a car. City Hall would much prefer you leave the thing behind. You're better to sell it. Sell it now.

A staff report delivered to city council this month recommends that any newcomer seeking a city parking permit in the West End be slapped with a 700 per cent fee increase. Current permit fees for existing residents are far

too low, at \$80 a year, explain city planners. Better to charge incoming residents at a “market rate,” which the city has determined to be \$50 a month, or a punishing \$600 a year.

The proposed permit fee increase would not apply to other neighbourhoods.

According to Vancouver transportation director Lon LaClaire, there are 16,000 registered vehicles in the West End, about one for every three residents, and more than enough parking spaces to accommodate them all: 22,000 off-street (mostly underground) private parking spaces and 2,700 on-street permit spaces.

A 700 per cent fee increase for a city street parking permit would force car owners to consider either giving up their vehicles, or renting an unused private space from, say, a neighbouring building.

LaClaire says there are thousands of empty parking spaces sitting underground.

Would the owners of those private parking spaces be persuaded to rent out their spaces to strangers? Who knows.

What is certain, says LaClaire, is that the proposed fee increase would discourage locals from parking their vehicles on the street. It would be a costly inconvenience for them, but a possible boon for West End visitors, who typically spend about 10 minutes circling the block, looking for a place to park.

There are 500 time-limited, no-fee parking spaces on West End streets, hardly enough to satisfy demand. Rather than create more, city planners have recommended that all free parking zones be eliminated, replaced with money-sucking parking meters.

Fewer and astronomically more expensive parking spots: The city can spin that as a public benefit, but it really represents a potential cash grab, to “be used to help pay for amenities in the West End,” according to the official plan. Which amenities? The city doesn’t say.

But Vancouver has no choice, says LaClaire. Projected population growth means more density is coming, and “you can’t accommodate those (people) in cars. It just doesn’t work.”

There’s some truth to that, for sure. But the city won’t tell the whole truth, which is that it has an agenda: to pester and drive out people who use cars. The latest parking fee finagle represents another city-led assault on the automobile.

Meanwhile, popping up across the city, including the West End, are large, metal bicycle racks, some plunked down on streets, blocking more lanes, preventing people from directly accessing their homes and stores.

The bike racks are permanent new pieces of city infrastructure, parts of a subsidized bike-share scheme cooked up by planners and a private, Florida-based enterprise, and endorsed by Robertson and his loyalists on council.

After experiencing years of setbacks and problems with erstwhile pedal partners, Vancouver agreed to pay CycleHop LLC about \$5 million to install approximately 1,500 rental bikes around the city. The city will fork over another \$1 million in “start-up funding,” another \$500,000 annually for signage and will give up a bunch of dreaded parking spaces to accommodate the bike share plan. The lost parking revenues will cost taxpayers another \$400,000 a year. Which is tolerable, apparently, because we now hate cars.

The “complicated” bikeshare project was to have launched in June, according to city officials. But there were delays. Some of the expected 1,500 bikes appeared in a smattering of locations last week, available to paidup program subscribers only, at least for the time being. A full launch is expected sometime in the future.