

Jury is still out on impact of downtown Vancouver bike lanes

Ridership is up, but businesses still complain about loss of parking and lack of consultation

BY JEFF LEE, VANCOUVER SUN SEPTEMBER 27, 2014



Cyclists on Hornby street bike lane in Vancouver, B.C., September 9, 2014.

Photograph by: Arlen Redekop, Vancouver Sun

Four years after Vancouver city council forced through separated bike lanes on Hornby and Dunsmuir, it is difficult to discern whether the lanes have had a lasting negative impact on local businesses.

Talk to some of the merchants who remain along the Hornby lane, who vociferously complained about lack of consultation and who feared a loss of on-street parking would kill their businesses, and they will still tell you that they suffer from the impacts.

But talk to the city and you get a different picture.

Higher summer ridership every year and more sensitive, custom-made block-by-block solutions to merchants' concerns has helped validate the city's view that if you build it, people will come.

Yet, there is virtually no hard data to show what impact Vancouver's new separated bike lanes has had on street-level businesses. After spending \$125,000 in 2011 for an economic impact study it admits was incomplete, the city has been reluctant to go back and sample merchants again.

At the same time the Downtown Vancouver Business Improvement Association says that the initial anger from its members over the bike lanes is largely muted now and has been replaced with greater concerns about high property taxes, crime, and homelessness.

On one of Vancouver's newer bike lanes, the Adanac bike lane's Union Street connector at Chinatown, merchants report similar concerns to those on Hornby: no new prosperity, but concern over the loss of

parking and a confusing message to motorists.

For the public, the Hornby lane, its connecting Dunsmuir and Burrard Bridge lanes and the city's single-minded determination to change how people get around remains one of the more divisive issues in the city. To businesses along the bike routes, the lanes are a linear symbol of what happens when broader public policy goals are instituted over the concerns of those who may be acutely affected.

Vancouver is not unique in creating separated bike lanes. Across North America, cities have made more room on their streets for cyclists, some creating separated bike lanes, others advancing their networks with painted lines, bike-only boulevards and special signals. They are responding to a renewed interest in recreational and commuter cycling, and are challenged with trying to find safe ways to accommodate this new growth on streets never really built for bikes.

Although Vancouver in past years built hundreds of kilometres of bike routes connecting most neighbourhoods, the downtown lanes became a beachhead in Vision Vancouver's plan to dramatically shift public attitudes around the city's car culture. Council and city staff argued that separated lanes and other methods of isolating motorists from cyclists would encourage the regular riding public — not the diehard bike commuters but rather those less comfortable with riding on busy streets — to hang up the car keys every once in a while.

Cities euphemistically call this new concept "AAA", or creating a cycling system for "all ages and abilities." In some places it may be a concrete-divided bike lane, such as along Hornby. On Union, Richards and other downtown streets, the city moved a parked car lane further into the street and tucked the bikeway against the curb. On quieter streets, the city has encouraged cycling boulevards.

The plan has worked, to an extent. Every year the city reports higher numbers of riders during the summer months. Coupled with the Burrard Bridge separated bike lanes and a growing network of new routes, Hornby, at least in the summer, has become a significant artery for the cycling public. In August, the city noted that 71,000 bike trips were made on Hornby in July. That's up from a first-summer high of 54,000 in 2011. Monthly winter rates remain in the 20,000-trip range. On Burrard Bridge, the summer biking numbers peaked last month at 195,000 trips, compared to winter lows of about 34,000.

Wedad Bishara, the owner of Marlin Travel Agency, and Mike Brascia, of Brascia's Tailors & Menswear, have stayed in business along the Hornby lane but believe it is an overblown social engineering experiment paid for at their expense.

Brascia's shop is on Hornby north of the adjoining Dunsmuir bike lane, and he has watched as the two bike lanes have sapped away customers and made driving hell for anyone travelling west and north into the central business district. A string of no-right-turn rules on Dunsmuir has created something of a no-go vehicle zone for anyone coming over the Dunsmuir Viaduct and trying to access northbound streets from Cambie to Burrard.

While many of Brascia's customers are businessmen who walk to his shop from nearby office towers, he said the divided lane right in front of his store is a constant reminder that the city puts more stock in cyclists than they do in encouraging healthy businesses.

"Of course I have seen my business decline. Customers can't park out front. But what has really bothered me is that they just simply put it in and didn't care about how it would affect businesses along our street," Brascia said. "I see it empty a lot of the time and I wonder why they needed to do this."

That comment is eerily similar to ones expressed by merchants along the new one-block Union lane, who struggle to find nice things to say about it.

"The city just did what they wanted," said Armin Tehrani, a co-owner of Board of Trade Clothing. "I can't tell yet if it has hurt our business but I can't say it has helped it either. There were a lot of people unhappy about losing 50 per cent of our parking."

Jerry Dobrovolny, the city's director of transportation, said Union businesses did raise concerns initially,

but have since said they are happier.

"On Union a number of businesses were quite concerned when the Adanac Union section was put in and they have come back and said it was really quite good for their business."

You might think one business that would benefit from a bike lane would be Union Street Cycle. But owner Bob Dong said that's not yet happened.

"With 4,000 to 5,000 riders a day you would figure traffic must be piling in here, but it isn't yet," said Dong, who believes the city needs to do a better job of working with businesses along bike lanes.

"The city is still pushing them through. That's why the businesses are still in an uproar. This is not a field of dreams. You really have to work at it," he said.

Back on Hornby, Bishara says her prediction four years ago that her travel agency would see a 10 per cent drop in sales has come true. But she thinks the drop in business may also have to do with the shifting landscape of the travel industry and peoples' propensity to use online discount travel sites to book simple vacations.

She has resigned herself to the fact the lane won't be going away.

"For many months of the year that bike lane doesn't get used much. In the summer it is busy, but then we also have people riding their bikes on the sidewalk on this side of the street. I don't suppose they are going to take that bike lane away," she said.

Dobrovolny empathizes with businesses along separated bike lanes. He has worked to make small — and sometimes large — changes to help them out, especially after the 2011 economic impact study of the Hornby lane done for the Vancouver Economic Commission estimated 150 businesses would likely lose upwards of \$2.4 million in the first year alone.

In the study, merchants blamed the concrete and planter-divided bikeway for an average 16 per cent drop in business over the first winter of operation, although in an accompanying survey, building owners and managers said vacancy rates had dropped from 11 per cent the year before to two per cent.

The findings did not prompt the city to remove the lanes. Nor has the city gone back to assess the real impact of the bike lanes.

Charles Gauthier of the DVBI said based on anecdotal evidence, vacancy rates on Hornby are now "much higher" than in the past.

"Whether that is because of the bike lane or because of the changing neighbourhoods I am not sure. We've always said it would be helpful to do a followup survey."

But Gauthier noted complaints from merchants have declined, and people are more focused on the other perils to business.

"Bike lanes may be part of the concern, but many businesses are finding they have bigger problems. If you look at all the priority issues affecting our members, bike lanes are well down on the list. At the top are property taxes, crime and homelessness," he said.

Dobrovolny said it is almost impossible to know whether the lane has helped or hindered street-level businesses. The 2011 study proved that point.

"A lot of people were saying how it was having a major impact on their bottom line but they wouldn't share any of the data. The consultant concluded it wasn't likely that bad if they wouldn't share more information with us," he said.

Since then the city has not wanted to incur the expense of a new survey. "We felt there was not as much value as we had hoped for. But if there is something specific that we are aware of, certainly we

can go and look.”

The Vancouver Sun asked the city for a list of businesses in operation on Hornby in both 2010 and 2014. The city said it was unable to comply because of the way it keeps the information, noting that it has 58,000 business licences recorded to companies along the street, most of them in the adjoining office towers.

Brascia, who said his business was hit hard by the lanes, was one of those who refused to hand over his financials for the 2011 survey.

“I asked them if I were to open up my books and prove to them the bike lane had hurt my business, would they remove the lane?” he said. “They said no, so why would I then give them my financial information? They have never been interested in fixing the problems for us, only making sure they keep their bike lane.”

Erin O'Melinn, the executive director of Hub, a bicycling advocacy group originally formed as the Vancouver Area Cycling Coalition, said the city made the right decision to install the lanes.

“The city took that important, brave step of saying they were going to put bike lanes through this busy area and we believe it will bring more people and it will improve mobility,” she said. “I think people have really come to understand it is a broad quality of life benefit. Even those folks who know they will never ride their bikes on that bike lane see that there is a benefit overall.”

O'Melinn said the city's priority now should be on linking the downtown with the eastern neighbourhoods via Burrard Inlet. The newly-opened bike lane over the Powell Street overpass helps, but there are major gaps elsewhere that still make cycling in from the east a challenge. She also believes a new survey of Hornby would be helpful, especially since the initial one was done in the spring of 2011, before the all-important summer bump in riders.

“I think it would be informative,” she said. “There were issues we found with how (the first one) was done and the results that came out of it. The lanes were completed in the winter and then the study was done during the spring to come out in the summer. There was very little time for people to change their behaviour.”

Laura Jones, an executive vice-president with the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, said the debate over the bike lanes may be over but businesses are still rankled over how the project was done. “In the case of the Hornby lane, the city went for the Cadillac solution and it hurt businesses. But we have always been clear; our members always supported cycling. This was not an anti-cycling movement,” she said.

“They are still concerned about the effect it has had on their business. It doesn't reflect well on our city council that they just pushed this through and didn't really care about the outcome.”

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