

Pete McMartin: Keep our roads safe — ban cars

Cyclist criticism is unfair: The consequences of rule-breaking by drivers are way more serious

BY PETE MCMARTIN, VANCOUVER SUN AUGUST 18, 2014



Pete McMartin writes that if critics of cyclists were to apply the same level of indignation to car drivers — that is, themselves — the degree of calumny would be the difference between being stung by a mosquito and being shot through with an elephant gun.

Photograph by: Gerry Kahrmann, PROVINCE

Odd, the public reaction to cyclists at times.

A cyclist collides with a pedestrian on a sidewalk — where clearly the cyclist had no reason being — and the knives come out on the letters-to-the-editor page, bristling with the correspondence of readers who want bicyclists licensed, insured, ticketed, tested, held to the same burdensome standards as motorists, and given a stern talking-to by law-abiding people such as themselves.

When writing about bike lanes, which I support and hope to see more of, I get emails from readers who complain about the arrogance of cyclists and their disregard of the rules of the road. They knock down grannies! They give drivers and pedestrians the finger! Their emails are spiky with exclamation marks.

Well, OK. Most certainly, there are bicyclists who are idiots. Case in point: I've ridden on sidewalks myself.

But if critics of cyclists were to apply the same level of indignation to car drivers — that is, themselves — the degree of calumny would be the difference between being stung by a mosquito and being shot through with an elephant gun.

People want bicycles to observe the rules of the road?

Would that cars did. Show me a driver that hasn't exceeded the speed limit, drifted around a corner without coming to a full stop or fiddled with the radio when their attention should be on the car in front of them.

Driving, by its very nature these days, is a continuous erosive compromising of the law. Can't get drivers to do 30 km/h down a residential street? Hobble it with speed bumps. People can't abide the slowpoke 100 km/h highway speed limit anymore? Jack it up to 120 km/h.

And the damage drivers do isn't just vexatious, as is usually the case with bicycles, it is calamitous. Forget global warming: Cars pose a more immediate threat to human life. Two thousand Canadian drivers died in car accidents in 2010, and another 2,227 "victim" fatalities were caused by cars in that year. <http://www.tc.gc.ca/eng/motorvehiclesafety/tp-1317.htm>

In that same year, 60 cyclists died, a figure slightly up from previous years, and over 90 per cent of those fatalities were due to collisions with cars.

As for cyclists causing fatalities or injuries against pedestrians, I couldn't find any statistics applicable to Canada, but one British study found that in 2012, 98 per cent of serious or fatal pedestrian injuries in urban areas were due to collisions with motor vehicles. Bicycles were responsible for the remainder.

And yet, what complaints do we see voiced over and over about the use of our roads? What transportation issue monopolizes public debate in Vancouver?

Bikes and bike lanes.

"A majority of people in Canada own bikes," said Kay Teschke, professor in the University of B.C.'s school of population and public health, "and most people want to have a safe place to ride. In our surveys, people (say) they don't feel secure riding in traffic and they do want separated bike lanes or bike paths that are on quiet residential streets.

"And I have to say that people who are in virulent opposition get way more press than they deserve. They are a small minority. Even though the majority support (bike lanes), and study after study has shown that this is the case, this small group is so antagonistic that they get more than 50 per cent of the press, and I don't think it's right. It really unbalances the conversation."

Teschke, who has done exhaustive research on cycling, agrees that cyclists could use more training about the rules of the road.

But then, she said, so could motorists.

"A lot of people, for instance, don't realize that bicyclists can take the lane, and should in some circumstances. They don't know what various bicycle facilities are and they don't understand them, and we've really fallen down in that type of training. So I think training about bicycling is what's missing for everyone, bicyclists and drivers. As far as breaking the rules, there's no evidence that cyclists break the rules more than drivers, and certainly consequences of rule-breaking by drivers — for example, speeding — are way more serious for pedestrians, drivers and cyclists."

Next time someone brings the subject up — say as an election issue in the upcoming civic election — perhaps they should be reminded of that.

More Thursday.

pmcmartin@vancouversun.com

© Copyright (c) The Vancouver Sun