

Despite critics, Vancouver will keep its cycle tracks

By Philip Langdon

The "Greenest City Action Plan" of Vancouver, British Columbia, calls for 50 percent of all trips in the 640,000-population city to be by foot, bike, or transit by 2020 — a substantial increase from the current share, which is approximately 40 percent.

As part of its nonautomobile initiative, Vancouver last year installed separated bike lanes (also known as "cycle tracks") on a pair of one-way thoroughfares serving downtown: Dunsmuir Street and Hornby Street.



The separated two-way bike path on Dunsmuir Street in downtown Vancouver. Photo: Mark van Manen, PNG, courtesy of The Vancouver Sun.

"You can never get high aspirations (for the number of cyclists) without separation," Planning Director Brent Toderian told *Planning* magazine some time ago.

This summer, city staff concluded that the experiment with separated bike lanes on Dunsmuir and Hornby should continue for another year so that their performance can be more fully evaluated. *The Vancouver Sun* said, "The decisions [to establish those bike lanes] were controversial, with business owners along Hornby complaining the lane would severely harm their operations."

A July 20 report from the Vancouver Economic Development Commission found that the two streets suffered sales losses estimated at \$2.4 million per year, which translates into a loss of \$480,000 in profits in a year. On the other hand, the vacancy rate on Hornby Street has improved substantially since installation of the bike lanes — vacancies fell from 12 percent in 2010 to just 2 percent in 2011.

Another July 20 report, from Jerry Dobrovlny, the city's director of transportation, found that the bike lanes have had a number of positive results:

- The number of cyclists on Dunsmuir rose to 55,000 in June 2011 and was expected to be still higher in July and August. That compares to a previous maximum of 48,000 in August 2010 and to approximately 10,000 a month in summer 2009, prior to the bike lane's installation.

- Cycling on Hornby Street sidewalks has declined 80 percent since installation of the bike lanes (from 3.7 percent in Fall 2010 to 0.8 percent in summer 2011).
- "The separated bike lanes have created a buffer between moving vehicle traffic and pedestrians on the adjacent sidewalk."
- Women have become a slightly larger share of cyclists in the corridor — 32 percent on Hornby, up from 28 percent in the Fall of 2010. The presence of women cyclists is generally a sign that a corridor has become safer, or at least *seems* less dangerous.
- Collisions on Dunsmuir dropped noticeably — about 18 percent. (There was no report on collisions involving bicycles.)

Meanwhile, two million bike trips have been made across the Burrard Bridge, a major entry point into downtown, in the past two years, according to [Straight.com](#), an on-line Vancouver news source. The number of people biking across the bridge jumped by 24 percent in the year after a trial bike lane was installed there.

Critics find problems

Some Vancouver residents remain cool to elements of the bike network, as can be seen in messages posted on Vancouver news sites in response to the recent reports. One Straight.com reader pointed out that the [Traffic Planning Division in Helsinki, Finland](#), has advised against cycle tracks, especially two-way cycle tracks, in dense urban locales. A report from Dr. Eero Pasanen of the Traffic Planning Division states:

In Finland and in Helsinki, we have an official goal of doubling bicycle use. This is an interesting goal from the point of view of traffic safety. While we have also decided to halve the number of serious bicycle accidents, no sufficient measures have been introduced. For example, we can not reduce bicycle accidents by building new cycle paths.

A recent study in Helsinki showed that it is safer to cycle on streets amongst cars than on two-way cycle paths along streets (Figure 2). The distribution of bicycle use was estimated by assigning a sample of real trips on a map. We got the origins and the destinations of the trips (street addresses) from travel survey data [/2/](#).

The basic problem seems to be that car drivers are not afraid of cyclists. At crossings, car drivers focus their attention on other cars rather than on cyclists [/3,4/](#). This causes troubles for cyclists, especially in a two-way cycle path system (Figures 3 and 4).

According to Pasanen, "the risk of a crossing accident is 3-times higher for cyclists coming from a cycle path than when crossing on the carriageway amongst cars. ... Right-turning drivers focus their attention mainly on cars from the left on the major street, and 'forget' the cyclists approaching from the right."

It's not clear how well accepted the Helsinki study is. Pasanen seems to go out of his way to find fault with urban biking. One of his odd assertions is: "A car driver who chooses to ride a bicycle instead may only provide an opportunity for somebody else to utilize the car."

At another point, Pasanen writes: "The important question is: *does increased cycling weaken the level of public transport service?* ... Cycling is attractive and healthy for cyclists, but public transport is essential for many and perhaps the most manageable way towards sustainable traffic." He warns: "The seasonal variation of cycling decreases the cost-effectiveness of public transport. "

He goes on to argue that "At least in Helsinki and in Lund (Sweden), cycling leads to more police reports of pedestrian injury accidents per kilometre traveled than does private motor vehicle use /1/." And then this: "One could claim that many cyclists feel themselves to be 'saviours of the world'. With their non-polluting, silent and relatively harmless vehicles, they may imagine that they have more rights than other road users."

All in all, the Helsinki report appears to be aimed more at making biking look bad than at finding effective ways to integrate cycling into the city's daily life. Whether that report will make much of an impact in Vancouver is doubtful, at least in the short term. City officials seem strongly committed to getting more people onto bikes. And they are dealing with a number of the problems that cycling can cause.

From a motorist's perspective, one of the downsides of adding a 12-foot-wide bike lane in Vancouver has been the elimination of 158 downtown parking spaces. However, according to the Transportation Department, other changes have been made, resulting in a net gain of 162 spaces within a block of Hornby Street.

Dobrovoly's report concedes, "The separate bike lanes have affected the ease of egress, and to a lesser extent access, at some off-street parking locations. Drivers leaving underground parking must, in some cases, cross both a sidewalk and two-way bike path before merging with traffic." Dobrovoly says the city will continue to work at overcoming the problems associated with bike facilities.

Toderian is emphatic about the direction Vancouver is taking. Since the 1990s, he says, "Vancouver has been addressing mobility not as a balance between modes, but with the following priority ranking. First walking (as every trip of every type starts and ends with your feet), then biking, then transit, then goods movement, and then the automobile. We rarely ban the car, we just prioritize it last."

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