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A proud pedestrian

15 Jan 2006

No wonder pedestrians often feel like second-class citizens.

But, apart from those confined to a bed or a wheelchair, we are all pedestrians. We stand and walk upright on two legs. This distinguishes us from other mammals.

If walking is associated with second-class status and drudgery, this should be cause for concern. It threatens our very identity and rights as humans.

Ottawa winters demonstrate this forcefully.

In the contest between snowplows that clear the roadways, and sidewalk plows, the former generally come out on top. For those who choose to walk to work, shop, or whatever; what are the options when the big plows have heaped snow on the sidewalks?

Do we perform amazing acrobatic feats, dancing on piles of snow until we hit the inevitable soft spot and sink to our knees? Do we take to the streets, playing chicken with cars and unpredictable drivers?

Then come the salt trucks, along with unseasonably warm weather. The snow melts, and puddles of dirty slush line the streets. Buses and cars race along, inches from the sidewalk, drenching pedestrians with filth.

Do we cower and cringe in the shadow of buildings? Do we dash past the biggest puddles during breaks in the traffic? Do we dress in rags and carry clean clothes, hoping to find a place to change at our destination?

Crossing the street presents the greatest challenge. The light turns green and the "walk" icon appears, but a huge, deep lake of icy water lies before you.

Do you take a running leap, only to fall short and spend the rest of the day in wet socks? Do you dart into the street where water levels are lower and dodge the traffic? What about hip waders?

Choosing routes along quieter lanes and byways becomes an overriding priority for the winter pedestrian. It's easier to pretend that "the streets belong to the people" when traffic provides less competition.

And then there are the shortcuts. Pedestrians alone, unaided by plow, forge their own paths across the empty wastelands. Good routes are clearly marked with packed snow.

Of course, someone must go first - a pioneering spirit willing to sacrifice socks and pants for the common good. The next few travellers literally follow in those footsteps, attempting to minimize the amounts of

snow falling into their clothes. How disappointing, then, when a thaw and subsequent freeze leaves such a treacherously uneven and icy footing that one is forced back on the sidewalks.

Unfortunately, an icy sidewalk can be even more dangerous than an icy footpath, given the higher probability that a fall will lead to an encounter with a hard and/or fast-moving object.

Weather is not always kind to the pedestrian. Before venturing out, a wise pedestrian considers past weather, current conditions and likely future events - particularly what the return journey may bring. With global warming, there are more winter days on which an umbrella is an option. This triggers a complex analysis, involving probability of precipitation, wind speed, and how likely one is to simply leave the darn thing somewhere and not have it on a day it is really needed.

Walking upright on two legs provides interesting challenges that have shaped the evolution of humans as a species. Biologists believe that this has contributed to our unusually large brains. Far from "lacking sprightliness or inspiration," pedestrians must be clever, resourceful, and imaginative.

Pedestrians deserve respect and consideration.

Ole Hendrickson is a member of the Ottawa River Institute, a non-profit, charitable organization based in the Ottawa Valley supported by volunteers, local donors and a grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation.

Rails and trails

07 Aug 2005

The Pontiac Pacific Junction (PPJ) Railway was incorporated in 1880 to connect Aylmer and Pembroke along the north shore of the Ottawa River. While the line never reached Pembroke, it hauled timber, wheat, milk, iron ore, and passengers for nearly a hundred years - until public roads replaced private rail.

The PPJ tracks were pulled up in 1984, but the right of way still serves snowmobilers in winter and bicyclists in summer. A scenic stretch upriver from Fort Coulonge goes through deep forest along the lower reaches of the Coulonge, crosses the river into Davidson, passes through farmlands, and skirts the Ottawa shoreline near Waltham. There is a picnic stop with tables, restrooms, and a surprisingly private beach.

The 75-km PPJ trail is by no means the longest converted rail line in the Ottawa River watershed. That honour belongs to the 200-km route of the former P'tit Train du Nord that ran from St. Jerome northwest of Montreal to Mont Laurier in the valley of the Lievre. Some former railway stations have even been renovated into cafes and boutiques.

The Ottawa's largest tributary, the Gatineau, also features a 100-km public trail north of the nation's capital from Wakefield to Maniwaki. While this former rail line stays well away from the river, it passes several beautiful lakes along its route.

Plans are being made for a trail connecting Maniwaki and Mont Laurier, affording future travelers an opportunity to take a long northern excursion between Ottawa and Montreal.

There are also many abandoned rail lines in the Ontario portion of the watershed, but the good citizens of

Ontario have allowed more to revert to private ownership. The rail line that followed the Bonnechere valley from Renfrew to Killaloe, then on to Barry's Bay (and across the southern part of Algonquin Park to Parry Sound), has been fragmented. You can hike portions of the old Kingston and Pembroke line between Kingston and Calabogie, but the portion near Pembroke is largely inaccessible.

Lack of public access to abandoned rail lines is a pity, given the lost opportunity for winter and summer tourism. Rail lines, with their gentle curves and easy grades, are ideal for bicyclists of all ages, and provide direct connections from town to town. As well, some lines may again be financially viable as oil prices continue to rise in coming months and years.

The fate of the Canadian National line that ran from Pembroke through Algonquin Park to North Bay, closed in 1995, is in question. Portions near North Bay have been converted to public multiple use trails. But no work has been done on the stretch west of Pembroke that follows the Indian River. Rough gravel makes bicycling unpleasant, although snowmobilers use it when snow depths permit.

A private foundation was formed in 1992 to construct a Trans Canada Trail – “a corridor in which travelers may hike, cycle, horseback ride, cross country ski or snowmobile from one Canadian coast to either of the other two coasts.” Given that travelers have followed the Ottawa River across Canada since long before the arrival of European settlers, it is ironic that this private effort resulted in a route that bypasses the Ottawa Valley,

While recognizing that connector trails could transform the Trans Canada Trail into a full Canada Trail Network, the foundation agreed not to pursue this until the main trail is completed in 2015.

Perhaps it's unreasonable to expect a private foundation to develop a national trail network. In this oil-scarce age, maybe it's time to diversify our public transportation network, and reinvest in rails – and trails.

Ole Hendrickson is a founding member of the Ottawa River Institute, a non-profit, charitable organization based in the Ottawa Valley.

Smart growth requires community vision

12 Jun 2004

Housing developments are smeared across the landscape, covering once-productive fields and woodlands. Leapfrogging outward, they leave vacant wastelands stranded in their midst. Tentacles of strip development extend further and further along major highways.

Our visual world has become a cacophony of vehicles, traffic lights, garish signs and commercial buildings, competing for our attention.

The automobile-dominated landscape is bad for families. Children cannot walk to school, and are chauffeured from activity to activity by their parents. For the nine-to-five worker, commuting reduces the outside world to empty space, a daily struggle against anything out of the ordinary: bad weather, traffic accidents, or construction delays.

It almost seems as some great explosion has happened at city centers, flinging out globs of concrete congeal into inexplicable patterns of roads and buildings. The costs are familiar: ever-increasing traffic congestion, accidents and fatalities; poor air quality; contaminated water and land; crime-ridden inner-city neighborhoods.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency sends up a red flag when 20% of a watershed is paved over. Rainfall no longer penetrates the ground, but rushes off in flash floods, washing away roads and driveways, carrying the toxic drippings from cars, trucks and buses.

Politicians struggle to cope with the maintenance costs of this sprawling infrastructure: repaving, plowing snow, rebuilding bridges, hiring more traffic cops. The economy grows, but also drives taxes ever upward. Costs are downloaded from higher levels of government to municipalities. Municipal politicians raise property taxes. Home and business owners struggle with the extra burden. People are frustrated, stressed, and angry.

And then there's climate change. We've pledged to cut our greenhouse gas emissions, which means driving less, but how on earth can we do it?

Did anyone think this out ahead of time? Yes and no. Zoning laws were designed to produce precisely this result. Housing was separated from schools, businesses, and recreational areas.

Ultimately, it may be health, rather than environmental or economic concerns, that finally persuades us to redesign the space where we live. Last month, town planners and health officials jammed into a Washington, DC conference on "Obesity and the built environment: improving public health through community design.

Two-thirds of North Americans are overweight; one-third are obese. Health officials warn of a worsening diabetes epidemic as overweight kids grow up. We drive everywhere.

Okay, so what does the ideal community look like? We can start by imagining suburbs built around a light rail system. Houses and businesses are concentrated around public transit-oriented development. There are bike lanes and walking paths. Different housing choices are mixed together with stores. Shopping is done mostly on foot. Denser development around transit hubs leaves room for natural spaces. Streams and wetlands are maintained in their natural state, rather than being entombed in storm sewers.

This is not rocket science. Many communities in North America are recognizing the importance of smart growth principles and are beginning to put them in place. among many benefits, reducing the dominance of the automobile can help bring back streets that are lively, vibrant places of social interaction and commerce. Existing housing developments designed for automobiles can be encouraged to evolve into more people-friendly environments.

It just takes some community vision and willingness to change.

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Smart growth includes "walkable" communities

01 Jun 2004 Administrator

"Walkable communities" is a term that has come to life in North America over the past ten years or so as an antidote to the problems of car-dominated communities. "Walkability" is an important component of smart growth that has many benefits. Forward-thinking communities are starting to incorporate principles of walkability into their official plans.

What does a walkable community look like?

Walkable communities have lots of wide sidewalks, with planted strips separating the sidewalk from the street. Trees, shrubs and flowering plants provide shade for people, and habitat for birds, butterflies and other wildlife.

Except for main roads, streets are relatively narrow and speed limits are 30 to 40 kilometres per hour. On-street parking is common. Crosswalks are well-marked in convenient locations so that it is safe and easy for walkers to move about.

Most main roads have bicycle lanes, and biking/walking paths offer alternative routes through town.

The downtown core is lively and compact. Businesses offer a wide variety of products and services. Merchants take pride in the appearance of their building, and there is a distinct character to the place. Significant housing is located nearby.

Most residents live within walking distance of 40 percent of the services and products they need on a weekly basis (small grocery, pharmacy, hardware, bank, medical services, day care, post office, restaurants, etc.).

Landscaping, benches, fountains and public washrooms make downtown streets, parks, waterfronts and public facilities pleasant and safe places to be.

Most children are able to walk or bicycle to school and to nearby parks. There are no rules against loitering. Street musicians and entertainers are welcome.

Walkability increases property values

There are solid connections between walkable environments and economic viability. A 1999 study by the Urban Land Institute in the United States determined that home buyers were willing to pay a \$20,000 premium for homes in pedestrian-friendly communities compared to similar houses in surrounding areas.

Another study found that a 5 to 10 mile per hour reduction in traffic speeds increased adjacent residential property values by roughly 20 percent. People identified safety, reduced traffic noise and less vehicle-generated air pollution as benefits worth paying for.

Communities across the United States which invested in making their downtowns more walkable have experienced lower vacancy rates for retail space, increased retail business, increased property value, and have attracted new private developments of office, retail and residential space.

Health benefits of walkable communities

People who live in walkable communities find it easier to be physically active. Regular physical activity in turn helps in many ways to maintain mental and physical health.

People living in walkable communities burn less fossil fuel, which translates to less greenhouse gases contributing to global warming, and less air pollution that contributes to smog.

How walkable are we?

I think most smaller communities in the Ottawa River watershed are relatively walkable. However, as new housing developments are planned and more box stores and parking lots are built, we need to build in walkability as a way to ensure that our communities continue to be liveable and economically viable.

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