

Appreciate the Fine Things: Choose to Walk or Cycle

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Have you noticed over the past few years how most urban or suburban communities you visit, at least in North America look pretty much the same as the place you live? Sure there are exceptions, delightful exceptions, but for the most part you and I drive past the same strip-malls, the same suburban houses, the same plastic back lit signs, advertising pretty much the same services.

This appears to be the way of the world and there isn't much that you and I can do about it if it does bother us. Largely we have gotten ourselves here because of the car. Henry Ford wanted families to be able to get out of the polluted, unhealthy cities and be able to have a pleasant drive and picnic out in the countryside.

But, most of us, of course use our cars to do the shopping, to pick things up, to drop things off and taxi our children to and fro. Like most things in life, the automobile makes a terrific servant and a rather tyrannical master. Two things I believe that we can agree on are that the experiences of riding a bicycle or walking are very different from driving in a car, and the bigger a store or entertainment centre the less personal and human it tends to be.

There is a problem with scale, when things get too big or too far away (which I am defining as beyond walking distance) the less connected you feel to those who are providing the service.

When a community is built around walking the place is much more likely to become a place "where everybody knows your name" rather than the anonymity that the speed of the car and the Big Super Stores encourage. The notion of "Bigger=Better=Cheaper" while not always true is not likely to cease or leave any time soon.

We're not likely to change our dependence on cars and yet there are some options; and these options are growing thanks to carpooling and slowly improving and expanding public-transportation, and move to rethinking urban design to change the scale.

Do you remember the Study Circle process that took place in Pitt Meadows, Maple Ridge in 2004? Many things arose at the table, but one common concern that came up in virtually every circle was the desire to build a stronger and healthier community by encouraging walking and walkability.

We've all read the studies telling us the many personal health benefits of walking. But do you know that it also improves the social and economic health of a community? It does, by the simple gesture of meeting friends and neighbours, chatting and sharing a story or two.... It's also safer because the more people there are walking around, the less crime you have and the safer you feel; the safer, in truth you are!

And are you aware that if you live in a community that is designed with people, and especially people walking in mind, the value of your home increases. Businesses see an increase in sales when downtown streets become bike and pedestrian friendly and tourists are encouraged to visit and to come back.

Think about it: would you rather stroll down a street that's lined with trees, where there are small locally run shops that you can check out, places outside where you can sit and enjoy a cup of coffee or simply rest on a bench or would you rather walk around a

Big Scale mall that features variations of the franchise shops that are the same wherever you go.

Making a community walkable brings money IN. Is there a need for capital Investment on the part of businesses and local government? Of course...The returns are incalculable. You can research this yourself don't take my word for it.

Parks and Leisure here in Maple Ridge, always concerned with the health and liveliness of the community it serves, started work on a walking campaign to encourage us to get out and walk... rain or shine.

To further this aim, on Sunday, September 12, 2004 the Building Community Solutions group, and Parks and Leisure hosted a Walkable Communities Event at the Act. In spite of a lot of other community events that happened that night, and miserable weather, about 30 people came out to hear Mr. Dan Burden, Director of Walkable Communities Inc, speak on Walkable Communities.

Dan Burden and his organization have helped over 140 cities from North America to the Pacific Rim come up with strategies to build walkable communities. Dan himself, a freelance photographer for National Geographic, Better Homes and Gardens and the Sierra Club has been helping people figure out how best to make their communities friendly and sustainable for cyclists and walkers for over 35 years.

Dan Burden has helped people in both Canada and the U. S. who started out with little money and only an idea, not even all that much of a plan, redevelop their downtown core. In his presentation Burden treated us to photographs - the "before and after" looks that we see all the time for weight loss programs - with the difference that the

communities were able and are able to keep their programs of sustainable and beautiful growth going.

An idealist, but not naive and not without a great deal of experience, Mr. Burden told participants that of course cars are here to stay. He also reminded the participants that traffic is growing throughout the world, not just here, at about 25% every 10 years. Stop and think about *that* for a moment.

Burden reminded us that we have to begin with where we are. A straight-forward programme for making a community more walkable and more attractive was then presented. Burden followed this up by quoting a recent survey places Vancouver and Victoria as the top 2 most desirable places to live in all of North America in terms of walkability.

Burden believes that a community should focus on its kids and on their families and that things should be affordable and available; that most of us, certainly children, learn better when we actually see real things, things that we can touch that are natural and safe, like trees and leaves, twigs and grass, water and clouds and animals.

“Take good care of your main street,” Burden urged. He asked if anyone in attendance remembered the time when they would walk down the street and see and hear and smell the differences between the butcher shop and the barber, the bakery and the green grocer? What about noticing the architectural details and differences of the buildings? the different mouldings, different brick or masonry or wood work? The pride of design and craftsmanship that resident’s used to appreciate.

When you and I whiz by in our cars on the way to some place else there’s just no time to enjoy these things, so they disappear and make way for more functional but less

interesting and attractive and distinctive landmarks. For centuries upon centuries buildings were built to be enjoyed and visited at walking speed.

Now, finally there is a world of difference between the kind of thoughts that your brain and your mind allow you when you're navigating through traffic and when you're walking through a neighbourhood, or a wooded area, or a business street. Henry David Thoreau, Mr. Burden reminded us, once wrote: *"Me thinks that the moment my legs begin to move my thoughts begin to move."*

Oh, and by the way, have you dropped by the open-air market in Memorial Peace Park on the plaza in front of the ACT? Farmers, artisans, bakers and entertainers have been enjoying themselves and so have the public who have come and walked away smiling. There have been helium balloons for the kids, buskers, and just in general a healthy happy community feeling. And don't forget to walk or cycle to the Market to make the most of your day!

For more information on Dan Burden and Walkable Communities check out his website at www.walkable.org. For more information on how to join or start a Walking Club in your area contact Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows Parks and Leisure Services.