



Letter to the Editor

On Nov. 17, city council endorsed an Active Living Charter for the City of Kingston. This marks a pivotal moment, and opportunity, for our city.

The charter signifies a commitment to promoting "active transportation," which means any form of self-propelled travel (such as walking or cycling), either on its own or in combination with public transit. It also means a commitment to promote recreational walking and cycling, as well as other forms of physical recreation.

The idea is for Kingston to become a city that facilitates the means by which all members of the community can safely and routinely travel under their own steam and engage in daily physical activity. As members of the Kingston Coalition for Active Transportation, we applaud council's initiative and wish to highlight the need and the opportunity that now exists to promote active transportation in our city.

At first glance, a concerted effort to promote active transportation might seem unnecessary. Are we not, after all, free to walk anywhere we like, or ride a bike when we please? Of course the answer is yes. However, the safety and ease of active transportation have been severely limited by decades of organizing our cities around the automobile.

Think of the difficulty of negotiating sidewalks in winter, especially after a storm and if you happen to be older or travel by wheelchair. Think of how intimidating it can be to ride a bicycle downtown or along any of the busy thoroughfares that link the city centre with the shopping and residential areas in the suburbs.

In addition, there are numerous gaps in the services and amenities for active transportation. There are few public benches on city streets to allow people to rest. Public drinking fountains and toilets, where they exist, are only seasonally available. Bicycle racks are uncommon beyond the downtown core, and sheltered bicycle racks are non-existent.

Our point, however, is not to deride our city for lacking some services and facilities. Kingston is no worse, and is probably better off, than many other similar-sized cities in this respect. Rather, the point is to celebrate council's recognition of active transportation as fundamental to the future development of the city and to draw attention to the opportunity for improvements that may arise from this endorsement.

The ecological, economic and public health costs of maintaining our current level of dependence on the automobile are not sustainable. Solid evidence of this has appeared in the daily news for the past 15 years or more. At the same time, an increasing number of Canadians and people in similarly automobile- dependent countries are recognizing the many positive virtues of active transportation, not just for their environment but also for their health and the health of their communities.

Active transportation gets us out of our vehicles and out of our habits of driving every time we need to get from one place to another. It allows us to see and talk to our neighbours; to build physical activity into our daily routine; to save money that would otherwise be spent on buying, fueling and maintaining vehicles; and to reach our destination without emitting an excess of harmful gases into our atmosphere.

The charter is posted on the city's website, and we invite readers to check it out. As you will see, it states that "Kingston supports active living" through policies, community designs, infrastructure, equipment, recreational programming, education and awareness, and working together with people and organizations.

Adopting this charter is an important first step in allowing council to move forward with promoting active transportation. Making this statement a reality will require a serious commitment from city hall, as well as the energies of all of us who want a healthier, cleaner, happier city.

With so many positive benefits to both the individual and the community, and with the momentum built by council's endorsement of the charter, now is the time to take the steps that will further encourage active transportation in the City of Kingston.

Jamie Linton, Carolyn Bonta, Spencer Moore, KCAT
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