

Mississauga cycling community's frustrations just go round and round and round

Key ingredient lacking in cycling strategy is political will, says John Stewart

Opinion Jan 12, 2019 by John Stewart *Mississauga News*

When Phil Green first appeared before local politicians nearly three decades ago, he was treated like Mississauga's favourite Martian.

Mayor Hazel McCallion openly scoffed at the idea people would ride bikes to work in her city and told Green to "come down to earth" when he proposed a commuter bike path along Burnhamthorpe Road.

"I was called a 'cyclist' with the same tone of voice people you'd refer to someone today as a racist or a sexist," the sustainable forest management consultant told Mississauga's cycling advisory committee (MCAC) Jan. 8.

The Lorne Park resident and two-time federal candidate gave the MCAC a retrospective of how much progress there's been since those discouraging early days, and a gauge of how very far there is to go.

His early efforts spawned a bike advisory committee, albeit one that met constant resistance from staff and council, and disbanded after mass resignations by frustrated members.

Green was setting context for the current crisis of confidence by the cycling community, which is understandably skeptical about the city's commitment to its strategic "pillars" of "move, connect and green" (no relation.)

There's lots to be discouraged about, including a cycling master plan approved by council despite a motion of non-support from the MCAC. Current funding levels would require 95 years to complete the bike path network, although staff's recommending budget funding this year would reduce that to 27 years.

Green showed photos of bike paths installed in his day, since obstructed by signs, poles, bus shelters and flower beds. "All the paths I took years getting aren't there anymore."

He complained the city ignored citizen expertise it solicits. Current members provided contemporary exhibits showing little's changed.

Members warned of unsafe conditions because of a sewer construction project on Burnhamthorpe Road path and, most alarmingly, passed a motion to close the city's new signalized crossrides (<https://www.mississaugabikes.ca/crossrides-and-bike-signals/>). The committee members believe the crossrides are confusing and potentially life-threatening.

No input on the design, which included difficult-to-see black bollards and utility poles directly in cyclists' paths, was sought from the MCAC. The bollards will be removed, signals better co-ordinated and paths realigned.

“The danger is baked right in,” said Dorothy Tomiuk, longest-serving MCAC member and one of at least eight departing. “This is serious stuff, that’s why we’re so concerned when we’re not listened to.”

In providing 10 commandments for MCAC members, Green stressed they must build political support for their cause. “The city has made huge strides since Hazel McCallion told me in 1990 to get real.”

The bottom line is now, and always will be, political will.

Departing chair Donnie Morris lit the fuse for this debate with an open letter to council about MCAC’s frustrations. Mayor Bonnie Crombie attended and heard the angst first-hand.

Mississauga’s cycling lobby isn’t going away, just shifting its line of attack. A citywide local cycling advocacy group, being organized by Tomiuk, looms on the horizon.

Meanwhile back at the budget, Mississauga seems about to approve its first safe, separated bike lanes on The Collegeway west of the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM).

It should invite Phil Green to cut the ribbon.

John Stewart is a retired longtime journalist with the Mississauga News. His column, My Back Pages, appears each week.

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