

Share the Road – It's Good for Your Health

The Southern Georgian Bay area boasts a vast array of natural attractions that make it a wonderful place in which to live, visit and explore. From the Niagara Escarpment which runs along the western border of Clearview Township to Wasaga Beach's 14km of pristine beaches to the myriad of cultural festivals and historical venues found in Collingwood's downtown core, it is a place residents are proud to call home and visitors are eager to discover. What better way to enjoy these attractions than by bike. Both on-road and off-road trails abound that not only support inquisitive visitors, but locals wanting to leave their car at home to bike to work, school, the park or the store.

However, cycling our local roads and highways is not always as pleasant an experience as many of you may have found. Co-existing with other road users, particularly motorists can often be a challenge sometimes with unpleasant results. For example during the period 2003 to 2007 there were almost 500 emergency room visits for cycling injuries in the Simcoe Muskoka District with over 40 of them resulting in hospitalization. Also during the period 2000 to 2004, 5 cyclists who were residents of Simcoe Muskoka died as a result of collisions with motor vehicles. Throughout Ontario, for the same period, 91 cyclists were killed as a result of motor vehicle collisions.

On the positive side, international research shows that as cycling goes up, obesity amongst children – a major public health problem – goes down. Research also shows that the health benefits of cycling outweigh the risks by 20:1. In addition research shows that people who switch from cars to bicycles enjoy substantial net health benefits including living longer by 3 to 14 months.

From a broader perspective, the benefits to health from activities such as cycling are significant. Physical inactivity is estimated to cause two million deaths worldwide on an annual basis to say nothing of the economic costs which have been estimated, in the United States alone, to be over \$75 billion per year. Experts agree that even moderate physical activity can reduce the risk of premature death associated with chronic diseases and improve both psychological and emotional health. So, if cycling is so good for us, how do we encourage more residents and visitors to take up the activity and how do we ensure that both cyclists and motorists take a responsible approach to using local roads and highways?

One way in which several local organizations are addressing this issue is through a Share the Road Project. This regional project is a partnership between the Town of Wasaga Beach, through the Healthy Community Network, the Township of Clearview, the Town of Collingwood, the Wasaga Beach Community Policing Committee, the Environment Network, the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit and several local cycling organizations. The Town of Blue Mountains is also supporting this initiative. By taking a regional approach to this issue the partnership can ensure consistency in messaging across a large area while at the same time potentially reaching not only local residents but also the millions of visitors who visit the area every year from the GTA and across the

province. The County is monitoring this project to determine its potential for county wide implementation.

Share the Road is a province wide initiative designed to educate and raise awareness about the benefits of cycling and the responsible use of the road by all users especially cyclists and motorists. Through a program which uses a combination of signage, media advertising and promotional material such as brochures, bumper stickers and billboards as well as presentations to local schools, service clubs, municipal councils and other interest groups, the local partnership hopes to encourage more people to take up cycling, improve relationships between cyclists and motorists and reduce the risks of motor vehicle collisions.

Remember. Same Roads – Same Rules – Same Rights