KELOWNA CAPITAL NEWS

Summit looks to beat transit issues

By Jennifer Smith - Kelowna Capital News

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In February, Newfoundlander Bernard Pike tried suing the Newfoundland and Labrador government for the cost of gastric bypass surgery.

His argument: paying $16,000 for surgery he booked through a private clinic would cost the province's health care system less in the long run than leaving him obese.

The little known news item served as perfect fodder for the Built Environment and Active Transportation (BEAT) summit held in Kelowna Tuesday.

In his lawsuit, Pike attributed his condition entirely to a lifestyle problem and it was this sedentary slump the city planners, Interior Health officials, non-profit workers and provincial parks staff spent the day trying to wrap their heads around.

A joint venture of BC Recreation and Parks Association and the Union of BC Municipalities, BEAT is pushing communities to spend on active transportation in order to cut health care costs, reducing green house gas emissions and stimulate the economy.

Keynote speaker Michael Haynes spent the morning pointing out signs that communities are not keeping pace with the problem.

"There has been a rapid and massive recent increase in the amount of obesity," said Haynes, the director of TransActive Solutions, a company targeting ways to improve Canadian communities' walkability and bikability.

Over the last 20 years the number of cars on the road has increased 25 per cent and the average Canadian spends 12 days worth of their year commuting.

"Typically, we're a driving culture," said Haynes, noting the more people drive, the harder it is to sell this active transportation concept.

To date, Canadians collectively drive 300 billion kilometres a year. Every one of those kilometres produces 0.4 kilograms of carbon dioxide, placing Canadian drivers high on the list of the environmental scourges facing this planet.

Stacked up against everything from transit systems to planes and the building industry, driving causes the most harmful emissions of any activity communities contends with, accounting for 43 per cent of emissions, Haynes said. And Kelowna is far from leading the way toward a healthier, greener lifestyle.

While we may boast 250 kilometres of bike lanes, only six per cent of the community regularly cycles or walks to work. There are some 91,000 vehicles on our roads driving an average of 30,000 kilometres a year, said City of Kelowna transportation supervisor Jerry Dombowsky.

But there have been pockets of success. The city's spring survey shows one in 12 people in the city's core commute by bike, though few come in from the outskirts.

When the U-Pass bus pass was introduced at UBCO, transit ridership on the lines students were most likely to use jumped 50 per cent. Transit is considered an active form of transportation as riders typically walk between or to get to rides. To encourage youth to try the bus, the city has a program where schools can book a free ride for their field trips, rather than taking a yellow school bus.

“Youth are a huge market for us,” said Dombowsky, noting many don’t ride because they haven’t been introduced to the system.

Mayor Sharon Shepherd, who opened the summit, told those gathered there are times when the city is also unaware of just what shifts occur in Kelowna’s neighbourhoods.

At Glenmore Elementary school for example, they’ve drawn a circle around their school and are working on planned safe routes and a possible ride share program, she said, noting she only just learned of their issues.

The city had applied for grant funding to try a similar planning initiative for all schools, but it was rejected. Dombowsky is hoping they can reapply in the spring.

Kelowna’s BEAT summit was the first of four that will be hosted around the province.