

Dear Mayor and Council,

From Brendan Ladner
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The mysteries of RMOW snow clearing - the sad realities.

I am happy to report that I do not own a car. This is made possible through e-bike ownership, by sheer determination and some sporadic pockets of great infrastructure.

It seems that every transportation plan of Whistler's that I have read, the objective is to increase walking, cycling and transit use.

However, the focus of snow clearing reveals a different priority: CARS! SUVs! PICK-UP TRUCKS!

In numerous surveys, the top impediment to winter bike riding is the weather. Despite mountains of evidence from around the world in what gets people to shift modes to active transportation, when talking with the RMOW I'm always met with some variation of Whistler Expectationism: "Yeah, but the culture in Whistler is different."

Is it actually different, or are we simply unwilling to try implementing what has been shown to successfully grow cycling rates around the world?

In wet places? According to weather-and-climate.com, Copenhagen (where the majority of trips are taken by bike) has 156 days of precipitation, while Whistler has 180... not a HUGE difference.

In cold places? The town of Oulu in Finland, is in the Arctic, and they have been leading the way in demonstrating to the rest of the world that if there is safe, convenient and comfortable infrastructure then people will choose to bike.

Sadly, the RMOW doesn't even make the existing infrastructure very attract to Active Transportation users. The current backbone of our Active Transportation infrastructure is the Valley Trail, which is maintained in an inconsistent and unreliable manner. How So?

As a regular user of the Valley Trail, it is impossible to know if the portion of the trail that you rely on will be adequately cleared for travel. During the heavy snowfalls of last week, the section of the Valley trail that I travel on was not cleared for five days - impassable for strollers, bikes and many others.

Some mornings around 6am, there is a pickup truck that drives the VT without a plow, and without dispensing any grit, compacting the edges of the trail and generally making the trail more unsafe.

Hours later, at inconsistent times, a plow may come; this plow may or may not dispense grit, may or may not have a snow blower attachment, may or may not have a plow. These plows cannot be relied upon to clear our trails before the morning commute. Some days certain sections of the trail are cleared, other mornings, that section will remain unmaintained while other sections are cleared. The lack of consistency makes it very hard to rely on the VT as a central route for us Active Transportation users.

This morning a RMOW vehicle travelled the trail near my home, and did not plow or dispense grit. Yesterday the trail was an ice sheet, any service before the morning commute? Nope, just waited for the rain to soften things up.

This inconsistency in snow clearing is a core failure in our attempt to convert more people to choose Active Transportation for mobility in RMOW.

These are the findings from a recent study in Finland:

The 3-day case study above opened: On the two first days the hardpacked snow surface softened and became slushy, and during the night it froze to uneven ruts and icy gutters, as they tried to save a bit on maintenance and didn't plow the paths properly as should've been done

Still on the 3rd day the paths were partly useless and/or dangerous. Only on the 4th day they tried to shave the worst ruts off and the paths were somewhat usable again. From the automatic data of bicycle counters we could see the effect to numbers of ppl cycling, which on those days were -20 %, -38 % and -36 %. Around that time there were ~78 000 bicycle trips made every day in Oulu that corresponds to ~231 000 bicycle km travelled per day. This means that during just three days we lost 217 340 bicycle km, which adjusted to the late.

November becomes about 140 000 bicycle km lost. The ppl replace their bicycle trips by about 10 % by public transport and almost 90 % by private cars

the actual loss is much much worse. Based on the counter data, we lost about 10-12% of ppl cycling for the whole winter, as they gave up and didn't return on their bikes anymore. We might have lost them for several years as well. Even for that single winter, this would make at least 1 600 000 lost bicycle km, probably over 450 000 € added expenses to the society from car usage, over 190 000 kg of extra CO2 emissions and over 1 300 000 additional km by cars. All this because they tried to save a few thousand euros from the winter maintenance.

Knowing that our transportation routes will be clear and safe is integral to shifting mobility to Active Transportation here in Whistler, but our focus seems to be elsewhere.

Everyday at the Whistler Golf Course there is a stream of snowplows and a small excavator that clears the parking lot. On the busiest of days there can be as many as 12 cars! parked there. These service vehicles sometimes even plow piles of snow over the access point to the Valley Trail, and never venture down the trail to assist what could be hundreds of Active transportation users per day.

As a cyclist, I am therefore forced to ride on the roads with drivers who insist on eclipsing the un-enforced and poorly advertised 30km/h speed limit. I am threatened by aggressive drivers who do not believe that they should share the roads; many can barely see me over their six-foot tall hoods. Biking on busy roads with frustrated drivers is clearly not attractive, it requires a very high level of persistence and compromises my safety.

“Whistler, where driving your car is the preferred means of mobility” is a message that has been heard loud and clear by residents and visitors alike. Everyone sees the efforts made to plow our roads, parking lots and driveways, and reacts in a totally rational manner, by driving their truck or car. See New Years weekend for proof.

Why take the bus, it's stuck in the same traffic as an SUV, plus parking is free and fixed costs are the same for a car if it is used or not.

If more people were able to travel by Active Transportation, perhaps there would be fewer cars stuck in traffic. But we'll never know because the RMOW will not implement policies and infrastructure that have proven to work around the world.

We aren't even getting into the Big Moves targets and emissions. What Climate Emergency? We are not talking about the economic benefits of shifting mobility. We are not talking about the mental health benefits of shifting mobility. We are not talking about the physical health benefits of shifting mobility. There are so many studies to back this up if anyone at the RMOW cares to look.

For now, PLEASE, create a consistent Valley Trail plowing schedule, start early and finish late, just like the work that is done in our parking lots and on our roads. This will allow the keeners like myself to model the future, and encourage those “bike-curious” folk to take the leap to riding over driving.

It's time for the RMOW to shift its priorities away from plowing the past and into creating a better future.

Sincerely

Brendan Ladner