



The Daily Gleaner

May 1, 2010

Road and Bridge Repairs: An Opportunity for Change

In the quest for a sustainable balance between the natural and the lived environments, there are two primary paths one can pursue: technological fixes or behavioural modifications. The first entails finding a technological fix to the perceived problems threatening our environmental sustainability, including such things as: installing photovoltaic solar panels to offset energy consumption, or establishing carbon capture and sequestration infrastructure in order to limit our greenhouse gas emissions. The second involves changing human behaviours, which are the root cause of the perceived problems. Behavioural changes include such things as: turning out the lights to lower energy consumption, or commuting to work by bike instead of car in order to minimize our greenhouse gas emissions.

These two approaches are not completely distinct one from the other and often function most efficiently in tandem, yet due to their very different natures most proponents clearly prefer one end of the spectrum over the other.

Behavioural modifications are clearly the less expensive of the two, yet are also arguably the most difficult, as humans tend to find solace in their habits and routines and are seldom willing to shift their ways. As a result, environmentalism is a discipline dominated by gadgetry, bold dreams and big budgets, even though many practical solutions are currently available with minimal investment.

The most challenging part of behaviour modification is in breaking old habits, as introducing new behaviours itself is not necessarily difficult—many people bike or walk leisurely on evenings and weekends yet seldom consider doing so as a means of commuting to work. Oftentimes, what is needed is an external motivator which forces a break in routine.

Just such an external motivator is about to be introduced to Fredericton: bridge and road construction season. The repairs slated for the Princess Margaret Bridge and the road repairs scheduled around the city will combine to significantly reduce the efficiency of routine vehicle-based commuting. And despite best efforts to expedite road repairs in order to minimize inconvenience, the reality is that road repairs cannot happen without a certain period of inconvenience.

In response, people will be presented with the choice of changing their commuting behaviour in favour of a more efficient transportation method or sticking to old routines and accepting the inconveniences attached.

I certainly do not support any efforts to impose inconvenience on others in the name of environmental sustainability, but in this case, the inconvenience is caused for the sake of improved and safer bridges and roads, and the resulting behaviour modifications, with positive environmental benefits, are simply collateral benefits.

When vehicle-based commuting becomes increasingly challenging this summer, you might consider engaging in alternative means of transportation – be it cycling, walking, carpooling, using public transit or park & ride/walk sites. And when doing so, try to keep an open mind with regards to your new commuting experience—who knows, you may just find that it is more enjoyable, efficient, budget-friendly, and convenient than your former routine.

There has been much investment in active transport infrastructure throughout the city, including such things as designated bike lanes, an expanded trail network, partial paving on the trail network, the construction of a bicycle ‘parking garage’ downtown, and additional bike racks. And local outdoor retailers continue to provide an increasing product line of new and more efficient gear for active transport—for example, the new generation of hybrid bicycles which are both comfortable and light-weight.

Perhaps you have tried such alternatives in the past but concluded that they were not convenient or efficient enough to warrant changing your commuting routines. However, given the intensity of this upcoming road and bridge repair season, you may just find that such options now win out over your current vehicle-based commuting routines in terms of cost, efficiency, convenience, fitness, and perhaps even enjoyment.

Taylor Gray is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Oxford, School of Geography and the Environment where he studies corporate governance in a Canadian context and instructs courses in corporate environmental management and corporate social responsibility. Gray is from Fredericton and periodically consults on Green Matters projects.