

SUBURBAN CYCLING



Rob Jowett

Increasing cycling in suburban Toronto will require more than new infrastructure. It also needs investments in social supports to change behaviours.

A new report from The **Centre for Active Transportation** examines the dilemma with increasing cycling rates in the suburbs: people are hesitant to cycle where infrastructure is non-existent, and lower cycling rates means that those areas are lower priorities for new infrastructure. The report is the result of a study into building a cycling culture beyond downtown, and was focussed on Scarborough.

“What [we] found is that... social supports are really critical to building both an interest and actually a change of behaviour for people to adopt cycling,” Centre for Active Transportation director **Nancy Smith Lea** told NRU. “[There] is a bit of a chicken and egg issue in the suburban areas where if we don’t have a demand for cycling, then politicians will think that there’s no interest.”

Despite the impression that the suburbs are all car-focussed, she said there is already a large constituent of cyclists, or potential cyclists, who want to both make short trips within their community and commute

longer distances across the city. The study found that there is already a high degree of cycling interest, but that people have concerns around safety and connectivity with respect to the existing cycle routes.

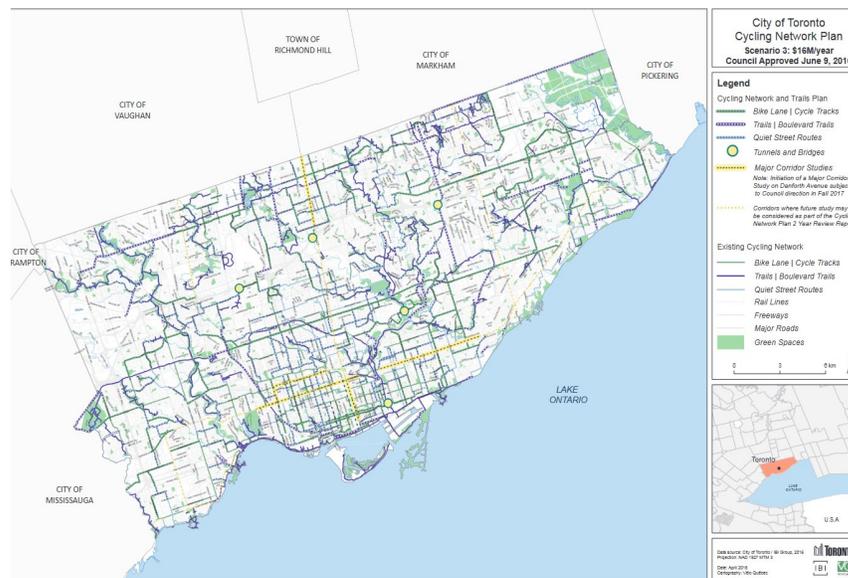
“We see, definitely, a nascent cycling culture in Scarborough despite the fact that... there is

actually very little infrastructure, especially on arterial roads, which is a huge challenge because traffic volumes are high, traffic speeds are very high, and so people who are riding bikes are forced to ride alongside motor vehicles that are going 70, 80 kilometres per hour on these arterial roads,” says **Cycle**

Toronto communications manager **Sarah Bradley**. Cycle Toronto also participated in the study.

An **EKOS Research Associates** poll in July backs up the study’s results, finding that support for a safer cycling network is at 78 per cent in Etobicoke, 72 per

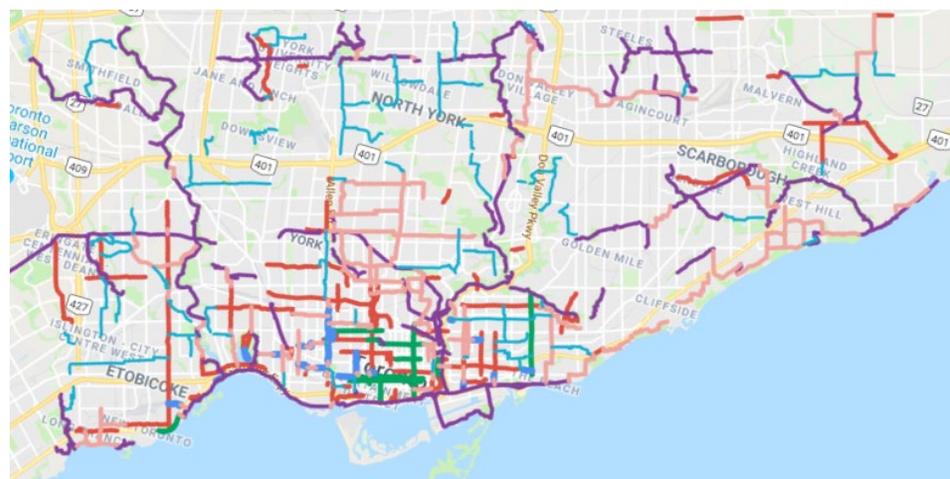
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If fully implemented, the city’s 10-year Cycling Network Plan would vastly increase cycling infrastructure across the city, including in the suburbs.

Most of Toronto’s cycling infrastructure is concentrated in the downtown.

SOURCE: CITY OF TORONTO



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cent in North York, and 75 per cent in Scarborough.

“It’s not a messaging thing anymore,” says **Access Alliance** Scarborough Cycles bike hub coordinator **Marvin Macaraig**, who was also involved in the study. “People get it. They want it. They’re always looking for more ways to get on the street. So what makes it difficult is... there’s a lack of infrastructure.”

But Lea says that while that polling indicates support for infrastructure, it does not mean that people necessarily want it for themselves—that they may simply support it in principle. She says building up cycling culture is what is needed to transform support into activism.

“Once you’ve built a constituency of people who love cycling, who want to cycle... and once that kind of interest has translated into action, I think that’s when you start to see that kind of push for change,” she says. “It’s when people can’t imagine cycling in an environment, can’t imagine what that would even look or feel like... we don’t see that translating into support.”

The study assessed the impact of bike hubs as a way to provide services to suburban communities lacking cycling infrastructure and a strong cycling culture. Bike hubs are

small spaces which offer both services, such as bicycle repairs, and programming, such as community bike rides.

Scarborough Cycles initially established two hubs as part of the study on the Danforth and in Birchmount. A third hub was subsequently opened in Agincourt, and a fourth in Woburn. Macaraig says the hubs have had a positive impact on cycling rates and community interest, which will help make the case for council to increase infrastructure in the suburbs.

The City of Toronto’s \$153.5-million 10-year cycle network plan is intended to add 525 kilometres of new bike routes across the city, including in the suburbs.

“It wouldn’t be as extensive a network, as convenient a network as we have downtown... but it would certainly be a big improvement over what we have now,” **David Suzuki Foundation** transportation policy analyst **Gideon Forman** told NRU. “And there would be a lot of connectivity.”

However, only 34.3 kilometres of lanes have been built so far, which he says is behind schedule. Bradley adds that very few of those have been in the suburbs.

“The only progress you’ve seen since the bike plan was

approved in 2016 is small connections to trails, which are great, but a lot of the time people [who are] commuting by bike... can’t necessarily just use trails. They’re probably going to have to be biking on major streets,” she says.

“We’ve seen zero progress on the Danforth because the corridor study was put on hold. So even though we’ve heard local councillors state their commitment to building bike lanes on the Danforth, without that corridor study in place and underway, nothing can happen... These procedural elements have to roll out in a certain way to even start talking about building bike lanes.”

Forman adds that lanes are also needed on Yonge Street and Bloor Street West to begin to create connections that can reach beyond the city, and that city staff should reach out to neighbouring municipalities like Mississauga and Vaughan to try and connect their networks together.

“I frankly don’t know what all the delays are,” he says.

“If you look at other cities, Vancouver [or] Montreal, these cities are building out their networks rapidly and enjoying the benefits. There’s been quite a bit of foot-dragging here in Toronto, and it’s a big problem. What we do know is when you put the bike lanes in... there’s a phenomenal uptake.” 🌱

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