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EDGES OF TORONTO: Cycling culture pushing its way into suburbs

Two bike hubs open up in Scarborough this year

BY SCARBOROUGH MIRROR
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The year 2011 was a bad one for cycling in Toronto’s suburbs.

Councillor Michelle Holland in Southwest Scarborough wiped out bike lanes on Pharmacy Avenue and Birchmount Road. Her residents, she said, called hundreds of times, demanding this.

The Rob Ford administration believed suburban cyclists wanted to ride on well-lit off-street trails, not busy city streets.

But that same year, councillors with wards atop the Scarborough Bluffs shelved extensions of the Waterfront Trail through three local parks – public lands you own – after getting earfuls from the neighbours.

Some claimed cyclists speeding through these parks on new paths would collide with seniors and dog-walkers; they would scare wildlife away.

Between 1996 and 2011, there was an “explosion” of cycling in Toronto’s core – in some areas, 20 per cent of trips were now by bike – but cycling in outer areas had declined.

Cycling advocates, however, didn’t give up on Scarborough or other sections of Toronto far from downtown where, unlike bike savvy neighbourhoods such as Trinity Bellwoods and Danforth Avenue, cyclists in traffic might still seem alien.

In 2016, they opened two bike hubs in Southwest Scarborough where, says Marvin Macaraig of Scarborough Cycles, riders shun

wider roads for Birchmount, Pharmacy and Midland Avenue, where traffic volumes are lower.

It's not just a lack of bike lanes: Toronto's suburbs have few stores selling or repairing bikes (for all its size, Scarborough has just one).

A downtown innovation, hubs offer repair clinics, safety tips and group rides, building confidence in cycling. "In this first year," Macaraig says "we have learned that there is a definite need and appetite for increased cycling programming in Scarborough."

Researching barriers to cycling in the suburbs, Beth Savan, a senior fellow at University of Toronto's Massey College, believes they can be overcome.

Drivers got used to cyclists downtown, she says, and it won't be rapid, but this "cultural shift" will happen in the suburbs, too.

If the city sticks to its plans, bike lanes are coming by 2025 to Midland in Scarborough, to Jane, Yonge and Bathurst streets in North York, and to Burnhamthorpe Road and Renforth Drive in Etobicoke.

Your neighbours might even like it.

Mike Adler is a reporter for Metroland Media Toronto. Edges of Toronto is a column about how people see life in Toronto differently, depending on where they live.

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