

Cyclists second-rate citizens on Edmonton roadways



ADAM
GAUMONT

Three days. Two deaths. No, this isn't about a rash of gang-related homicides in Edmonton, it's about people who've been killed while riding their bicycles.

The first, more troubling incident occurred on Saturday, when a hit-and-run left a cyclist dead on the shoulder of Stony Plain Road and a damaged Dodge Ram nowhere to be found.

Then, on Monday evening, a cyclist was killed in Mill Woods—at a crosswalk, no less—after he was struck by a Chevy Camaro. At least that driver had the guts to stick around afterwards.

As anyone who's ever tried it can attest, bicycle-commuting in Edmonton has always been risky business—these latest horrific events just serve to underscore the point. There was just one cycling fatality in Edmonton in all of 2006, and none in 2005, but it would be foolish to conclude that the danger to cyclists is increasing exponentially. The risk has always been there—and will continue to be there—so long as you put cars and cyclists in the same lane.

The reasons for this danger are obvious enough: Edmonton, like most other mid-sized Canadian centres that grew up in the golden age of suburbia, is a driving city. Decades of boom-and-bust growth have resulted in sprawling blanket communities

and commercial centres that are only accessible by vehicle. These economic booms (most notably the current one) have also led to widespread misconceptions of self-entitlement—not to mention lots of disposable cash for hot rods and pickup trucks.

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But Edmonton isn't the only city in North America choked with traffic. The problem, rather, lies in the fact that there's nowhere else that cyclists can ride. Our city may lay claim to some of the finest and most extensive urban parkland in the world, but unless your daily commute takes you from Rundle Park to Hawrelak or the Velodrome, you're out of luck.

The concrete jungle that looms above the verdant River Valley is what most of us need to navigate everyday to get where we're going, whether by car, bus, bike, or on foot—and unfortunately, the beaten paths for bicycles there are few and far between.

These beaten paths—also known as “bike lanes”—are by far the most sensible solution. You might have heard of them: there are even a few token examples on University-area streets. But try

taking any one of these lanes from Garneau or the Hospital and see how far you get—usually, it's only about five blocks before they die out, spilling you into extremely congested areas like 109 Street or Whyte Avenue.

Often, these simply turn into designated bike “routes”, which are a complete joke. The only difference between these and other unmarked streets is an occasional sign reminding drivers that they might see a cyclist somewhere, and reminding cyclists that they might see a car somewhere (that is, if they have enough time to look around while dodging the swinging doors of parked vehicles).

Sidewalks are an option too, albeit an illegal one. The least the City could do here is give cyclists a safe, legal option by decriminalizing the practice, but zipping in and around pedestrians will never be a very efficient—or safe—method of transportation.

In looking for a more viable and long-lasting solution, then, Edmonton could use to swallow its pride and take a few lessons from other Canadian cities. In Toronto—easily the most traffic-jammed city in Canada—the streets are veritably swarming with cyclists who are, likewise, without the comfort of many cycling lanes. The only thing that prevents them from getting squished is a little bit of cultural tolerance—other than the Freeways, cyclists and pedestrians have the right of way there, with cars crawling slowly behind.

Such a cultural shift is unlikely in Edmonton, however, where drivers would sooner give up their first-born than lose their spot in the Tim Hortons drive-through. Instead, we

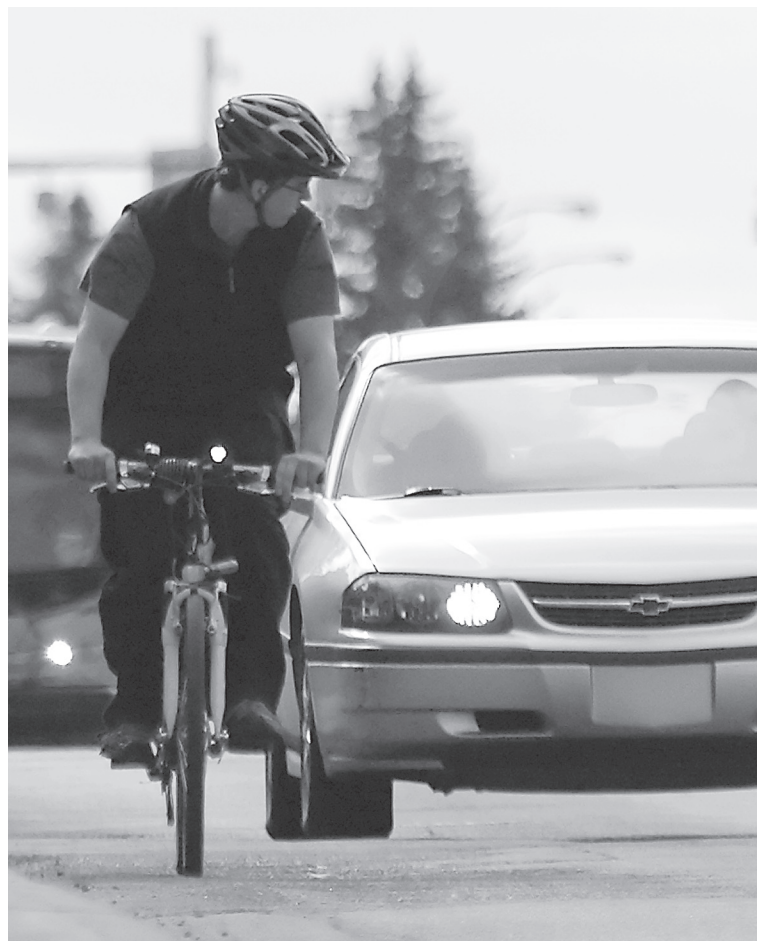



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: TARA STIEGLITZ

BRRRING BRRRING There's no use ringing your bell—cars don't care about bikers.

should take a page from Ottawa's book, where wide, efficient bike lanes abound. Bicycle-commuting is a viable option in our nation's capital (as is skating to work in the winter), and it's a safer, better-designed, less congested city for it.

All Edmonton would need to do to get to a similar level is replace parking

lanes with biking lanes—an unpopular decision, perhaps, with the driving crowd, but certainly not a crippling one. Such a move may even encourage a few more people to start biking themselves, once it becomes less dangerous. And perhaps most importantly, no Tim Hortons drive-throughs would have to be bulldozed in the process.



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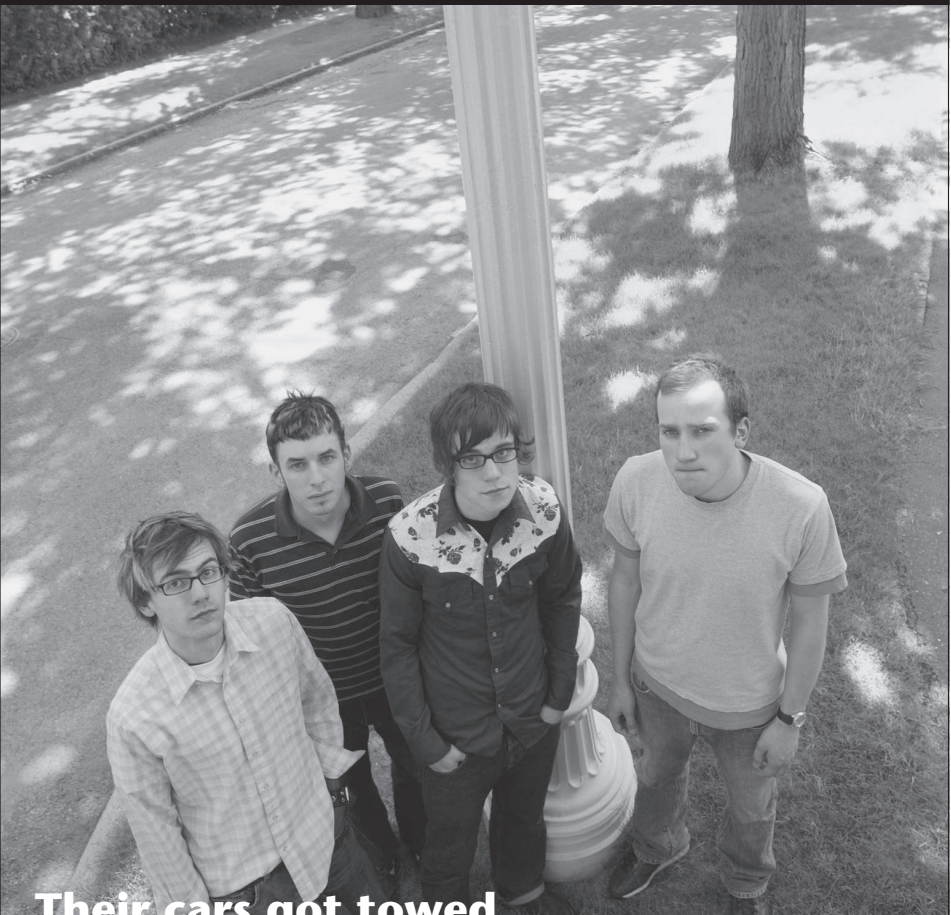
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