

Putting our money where our feet are!

By Laena Garrison

Social freedom, independence, mobility... since the mass production of the Model T Ford in 1913 made car ownership affordable, the car has become a common symbol of these values. Over the past century, mass production of cars and the growth and expansion of roads and highways have fed our love affair with the car.

Today, the negative impacts of our love affair are necessitating a break-up. Poor air quality, physical inactivity, crosswalk fatalities, rising gas prices and global climate change, are all costs linked to car-dependence. By making communities more pedestrian and transit-oriented, we can avoid many of the costs of car-dependency and move towards a healthier relationship with transportation.

Halifax Regional Municipality has been working on a Regional Development Plan, which supports the growth of mixed-use transit-oriented centres, where community hubs are connected to one another by public transit. Stated in the HRM Plan, "rather than expanding costly road networks, new transit solutions can be applied to meet the needs of the public". The transit-oriented centres will also feature "a comfortable and safe environment for pedestrians and cyclists". Despite these elements of the Regional Plan, current proposals for road construction within the HRM seem to cater to private car travel.

Two of these proposals have been in the media over the past few weeks:

- A municipal project to widen Chebucto Road and build a reversing lane is meant to handle rush hour traffic congestion off the Armdale Rotary. This municipal project will cost \$1.5 million dollars and, along with changes to the Armdale Rotary, will double the capacity of the rotary.
- The construction of the 9.9 kilometre Highway 113 would connect Highway 102 and 103. This proposed provincial project is estimated to cost 30 million dollars, and will allow drivers to bypass sections of Highways 102 and 103 and Hammonds Plains Road. Commuters between Timberlea and Bedford will shave 8 minutes off of their driving time.

Both of these proposed projects are controversial: the Chebucto Road widening because it will remove several feet off of people's properties on Chebucto Road; the Highway 113, because it will cut across the Blue Mountain – Birch Cove Lakes Wilderness Area.

Controversies aside, I question how spending \$1.5 million dollars to reduce traffic congestion on a small section of Chebucto Road can be justified. Widening or building more roads generally does not result in less traffic congestion. In fact, it can often shift the congestion to other areas, or, allow traffic volumes to increase and fill the new road capacity. I also question whether spending \$30million dollars is worth reducing driving time between Timberlea and Bedford by 8 minutes.

For long-term reduction of traffic congestion, and changes in people's transportation habits, people need options – transit, carpooling, walking, or biking should be

convenient, safe, and reliable, and allow people the same independence and flexibility in mobility that they have with a car.

The new HRM Regional Plan aims to support transit-oriented transportation and create safe environments for pedestrians and cyclists. Neither the Chebucto project nor Highway 113 will help HRM achieve these goals.

These 31.5 million municipal and provincial dollars could be spent on a variety of other projects, which *would* help HRM achieve their vision:

Proposed uses for \$31.5 million	Alternative uses for \$31.5 million
One 9.9 km long highway (\$30 million).	Complete the short-term goals of HRM's Bicycle Blueprint (~ \$3 million)
One reversing lane the length of six city blocks for (\$1.5 million).	Launch two new rapid transit Metro Link routes (~ \$13 million)
	City removal of winter snow from all HRM sidewalks for safe walking and wheelchair accessibility (\$6 million)
	10 kilometers of new sidewalks (\$4.5 million) 1 pedestrian highway overpass (\$400 000) < 20 new crosswalks, including painted lines and lights (\$4 million) Pedestrian safety program (\$50 000)
	Halifax Open Streets Events (streets closed to traffic, open for play) once a week, four months a year for five years (\$400 000)

Ironic, isn't it? Currently, \$1.5 million municipal dollars and \$30 provincial dollars are proposed to be spent on widening a road and creating a new highway, while the lack of infrastructure for pedestrians, cyclists and public transit users is restricting their social freedom, independence, and mobility - the very values that cars now represent.

We need to adopt new symbols for social freedom, independence, and mobility. The car and the expansion of roadways are out! Safe infrastructure for pedestrians, cyclists and other wheelers, and convenient, accessible, rapid transit are in! By prioritizing our spending on transit and pedestrian infrastructure, we can increase the mobility, freedom, and number of options for all transportation users.

Laena Garrison is a coordinator of TRAX, the Ecology Action Centre's sustainable transportation project, and Co-Coordinator of the recent Halifax Open Streets Festival.