

WRA Winter AT Write Up - Confessions of a novice winter cyclist

Anticipating a COVID winter reminds me of a Nike poster I had in my bedroom as a teenager. It said, “there will be clubs you can’t belong to, neighbourhoods you can’t live in, but the roads are always open”. The poster had the image of a woman running down a prairie road past a church. On Oct 19 the WRA held a public online meeting about active winter transportation in preparation for our COVID winter. The plans for the bike/walk corridor for Wolseley by the City of Winnipeg are stalled, but it seems people are still out more after our successful experience with Open Streets this past spring and summer.

I have to admit it, up until last year I was afraid of cycling in winter. And I have cycled down trails that turn into swamp, paddled white water, hiked the Rockies in the rain, and gotten lost on ski trails when it was cold. But the benefits of cycling in winter could not beat the sense of risk. Maybe now the risks are worth reconsidering, especially when taking the bus will possibly increase our risk of COVID exposure.

Really there is nothing that can make you feel like a kid again, more, than riding a bike. The freedom and sense of joy from pedaling with the wind, makes you realize the mental health benefits of exercise especially outdoors. It is more than hype. There is an emotional lift. A spiritual aspect even; a being at one with the world. That is why it is called recreation; we are recreated when we have experiences of play. And you can have that on a commute, to work, or the store, etc. Of course, when we cycle, we are also reducing carbon emissions and vehicle traffic and congestion. We are countering car culture and there is a sense of community that comes from cycling. There is also the time efficiency of using your commute for recreation and exercise rather than driving to a gym or something.

But let’s be honest there are many hazards. The risks of the other drivers in two ton vehicles that don’t stop as fast in the snow and ice. Many who think you are crazy to be on the road, in the snowy cold and early darkness. There is exhaust and poorly plowed streets and lanes. There is the cold to contend with specially for toes and fingers and faces. And conversely overheating and dealing with sweat, which does not mix well with wind or cold, requiring you to get where you are going and inside right away to change your clothes. Then the wear and tear on your bike with snow build up, and potential rust and bike light batteries don’t last in cold. The bike thieves are less active in winter, but it does happen. Or locks can freeze if you can’t bring your bike inside.

The all star panel at the WRA meeting was to help break down these barriers and give people more confidence to give it a go. To counter each one of these hazards we had:

Adrian Alphonso is a young cycling aficionado of Ojibwe and Guyanese lineage who lives in Wolseley riding his bike in winter since 1996. He operates Momenta Clear Paths offering cycling tours of Winnipeg including paths with Indigenous points of interest. He is also with Trails Manitoba Board, <https://www.trailsmanitoba.ca/> MB Cycling Association, <https://mbcycling.ca/> and offers bicycle education as well as commutes and competes on his bike. He is a good resource on what to wear, on bike repair and maintenance in the cold, as well as how bikes work.

Leigh Ann Parry with Winnipeg Trails Association <https://www.winnipegtrails.ca/> the group developing school active transpiration AT loops to encourage more kids to bike to school. They are planning skate trails and bike trails with packed snow. She shared photos from Finland where winter cycling is the norm and spoke of one school in Olu that had 900 of 1000 kids bike to school everyday year round. She has been involved with the International Winter Cycling Congress <https://wintercyclingcongress2021.be/> Yep, who knew, right? If there is going to be a kick-sled revolution in Winnipeg Leigh Ann will be behind it. Image of kick sled below, is a dog sled without the dogs.



Camille Metcalfe a volunteer with the W.R.E.N.C.H or Winnipeg Repair Education Network Cycling Hub <https://thewrench.ca/> they recover and repair bikes and teach anyone to fix and make bikes from parts. They will help people build a winter bike that does not look worth stealing. Usually without de-railers that get clogged up. John Anderson the Transportation Committee Chair also volunteers with the WRENCH. Bikes can be dropped at 4R Depot to divert them from landfill to the WRENCH.

Laurie Penton from the Manitoba Cross Country Ski Association <https://www.ccsam.ca/> and Windsor Park Nordic Ski Centre <http://windsorparknordic.ca/> gave us the low down on where to ski and plans for more groomed trails in and around Winnipeg. Turns out Winnipeg is one of the only cities in Canada with ski trails lit until 10 pm every night for winter fun with trails freshly groomed daily. They will have ski rental this year outside to ensure safe distancing and pre-booked rentals. But no ski swap. The Forks Trail will happen this year weather and ice safety permitting, they are open to grooming ski trails on the river if funds are available. Skiing is often not for commuting.

Here is what they had to say about biking as winter active transportation.

Building winter AT infrastructure and systems

There is an interest in grooming short trails in local parks in Vimy Ridge and Omand's Creek where a short loop could be created. We discussed looking at the use of creeks for AT. Winnipeg can follow the example of other cities like Minneapolis and ensure bike lanes are cleared of snow along with sidewalks.

Winnipeg Trails Association are also hoping to groom ski trails in Winnipeg. Working with Winnipeg School Division, and other partners like Ski Winnipeg. They are learning about where snow can be packed for things like kick sleds and other AT uses. For some AT you need the snow. How to get more people to bike in winter. We know what works is planning on a mass scale, not just individual level. The question is how we as a community can ensure kids can do it.

LeighAnn felt it is not that challenging. Winnipeg Trails is making the loops to see how far we can push our built environment to help others get active. Address how much space cars take up, and the safety risks. Biking is not unsafe unless you are also dealing with a car. She also encourages outdoor activities at schools. In response to questions about the comparison of bike paths in downtown areas, and the majority of people drive cars and are inconvenienced by cyclists on the road or by closing streets to cars use. It is hard to ride a bike for shopping when you buy a lot. By first considering the energy invested in car use, the cost of fuel, the cement, car manufacturing and repair adds up. The personal experience of car convience in born by people in the future. Looking at various options for shopping besides shopping for large quantities at one time. It is only in recent history that we spent so much time indoors and using cars for transportation based on a series of actions with many factors impacting our freedom to move is

impacted by colonization, and the market economy, we separate people based on socio economic status. The needs to get food and eat can be realized through other modes of transportation.

The experience of Open Streets showed what is possible for outdoor active transportation and recreation. For example, could Wellington Crescent be made only for bikes etc. on one side and two way traffic on the other side.

Pride of winter cyclists and the sense of community. Knowing the routes to choose is important and being visible. We need to get the City to clear the bike paths. In some cities like Minneapolis they clear snow from bike lanes first.

There was discussion about “hostile infrastructure” for those who don’t drive. Anyone under 16 and people with disabilities are always at risk with navigating the city.

Bike culture and overcoming fear

Here is what he had to say. Whether transportation recreation or sport, are all important, and traveling by bike in winter is not new. We need established routes and to prepare, then just do it. Recreation and bike trails, snowshoes and skis, good to embrace winter and use what we have. Adrian maintains that if you can stand outside and wait for a bus for 20 minutes you can ride your bike and get a lot of places. Bike Winnipeg also has a link on tips for winter riding. <https://bikewinnipeg.ca/ride/winter-cycling-in-winnipeg-can-be-successful-and-rewarding/>

What to Wear and Equipment Ideas

Over heating is not bad – cross country ski clothing is the best, with a larger fitting helmet for over hood and ski goggles, muffs up over your neck and face.

Camille emphasized re-chargeable bike lights that you can bring inside while at work etc. Warmth for thighs was layers or a jacket tied around. Battery operated socks to keep feet warm. Being visible requires,

Going on the sidewalk in winter is not an option as much in summer when road is unsafe. Drivers are not aware of how close they are to you along the curb. Ideally, we would not be sharing the road. I use a bike panier that sticks out almost a foot on the left side to help make me wider along the curb.

Bike Care

Bike care in winter requires more diligence. Bringing your bike indoors for the night to ensure it thaws is best for care. Use an old windshield brush to knock off snow and ice to prevent corrosion. On well used routes in town the use of salt is hard on bike corrosion. Adrian recommends visiting a wand car wash during the winter to get snow and grit off. Community bike shops are a good help and resource for any questions or needs. -2C and -15C are the best conditions. Colder than that shocks on bikes are affected by freezing, suspension droops, rubber on tubes and tires is harder when frozen. Changes in temperature challenge suspension and the wheel clogs up. It is a trade off between suspension or fender coverage of wheels. Studded tires are good especially on the front. It is best on polished icy surfaces to help with breaking and steering. Covering the floor in the house to catch bike run off.

Safety

The WRENCH set up a program at Gordon Bell to help kids access wheels. And they gave out good locks and taught about how to lock your bike properly. What we do to ensure bikes don’t disappear. Bikes

being stolen is a consideration for AT. There is a problem with vandalism for example tires being pinned. There are locks that can't be unlocked when wheels are locked separately. Winter bikes are less appealing to be stolen. They run well but look like crap.

In conclusion, winter outdoor activity, especially cycling is one of those things make you humble and proud at the same time. Humble so you don't forget you are on two thin wheels in the snow, and proud that you are actually doing it. It is a study in overcoming fear and suddenly you find that joy that riding a bike can bring.