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Premiers Economic and Social Advisory Council
secretariat.PESRAC@treasury.tas.gov.au

Supporting bicycles in COVID recovery

Dear PESRAC

As chair of the Tasmanian Bicycle Council and Public Affairs Manager for Bicycle Network Tasmania, I wanted to share information with you about how governments around the world are supporting bicycle use as part of their responses to COVID-19 and how Tasmania could adopt similar approaches.

They are investing in bicycle infrastructure to provide people with a transport option that doesn't expose them to the chance of catching COVID-19, to support jobs in the construction/transport sectors, and accelerate existing plans to provide cities with healthy, sustainable transport choices.

Tasmanian transport needs

Before COVID-19 hit Tasmania was grappling with the problem of how to get people to change transport modes for their commutes to work and school. It's generally more cost-efficient to encourage people to walk, ride or catch public transport than build expensive new roads and car parks.

It also provides the added benefit of people getting regular exercise which helps in the fight against preventable diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and some cancers, as well as strengthening immune systems.

During the COVID-19 stage 1 restrictions people took to local streets to walk and ride as gyms, sporting competitions, and other recreational options closed and people were asked to stay close to home and only go out for exercise or essentials.

People who may not have ridden since they were children got back onto bicycles and people who were not confident riders have gained more experience and skill.

Clarence Council's permanent foreshore trail bicycle counter found a 78% increase in rider movements in April compared to the average of the preceding 9 months.

Bicycle Network Tasmania did a 2-hour count at 6 recreational paths around Hobart on 25 April and found riders accounted for half or more of users at some sites and rider numbers were up on our annual commuter count at the same or nearby locations.

Other Australian cities have also seen significant increases in the numbers of people riding on recreational paths. Bicycle Network's count at a number of Melbourne paths found weekend riding numbers had increased by more than 200% on previous counts. At the same time, commuter cycling numbers have decreased at other sites as people have worked from home.

While we are now in second stage restrictions and will hopefully move to the third stage in July, the one thing that won't change will be the need to physically distance from others until a vaccine or cure is found.

There is a danger that people who normally take public transport will worry about catching COVID-19 and so drive to work and/or school instead, increasing traffic congestion.

New bicycle infrastructure

Many cities around the world are quickly rolling out infrastructure to help people ride and walk to avoid this traffic congestion, further their active transport goals and give businesses an economic boost as people who ride and walk tend to spend more in local shops than people who drive.

Most Tasmanian urban paths are not 1.5 metres wide, so people walking, running and riding are moving into parking and traffic lanes to give others enough space when passing. And when paths are wide enough, seats, sandwich boards, poles and other infrastructure can narrow them.

By re-prioritising road space, governments can provide safer conditions for people walking and riding and thus encourage them to do it more.

Governments around the world are transforming parking bays or traffic lanes into cycleways or wider footpaths. The simplest way to do this is to lay out lines of heavy traffic bollards as barriers, but planter boxes, concrete blocks and any other physical barriers can be used.

Some cities have just used paint and tape to repurpose road space, but that must be accompanied by a drop in speed limits to give people confidence they will be safe from traffic injury.

Almost all cities are dropping speed limits to 30 km/h when any road re-allocation is occurring. This is because research shows that 30 km/h is a relatively safe speed for people to survive if hit by a vehicle. At 30 km/h or below people have a 90% chance of surviving if hit, but at 45 km/h it's only 50% and continues to decline as speeds rise.

Australian cities have lagged behind North American and European cities in cutting speed limits to safe levels in streets where there are significant numbers of people walking and riding. The COVID-19 distancing restrictions are a chance to trial the safer speeds in our city centres and get drivers used to slowing down around vulnerable road users.

Retrofitting streets with cycleways can be labour intensive as each situation is different so it's harder to just roll out machines and a template response. Traffic engineers, landscapers, draftsmen, communicators, sign makers and construction crews are all involved in planning and building cycleways whether they are temporary or permanent.

What the Tasmanian Government can do

Bicycle Network has put together a proposal for state and federal governments for funding to encourage bicycle use as an immediate six-month response to the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions:

https://s23705.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Pedalling-to-a-better-normal_Bicycle-NetworkFINAL.pdf

The Heart Foundation has called on Australian and state governments to reallocate road space to people walking and riding, drop speed limits and automate pedestrian crossing lights:

https://www.healthyactivebydesign.com.au/images/uploads/PositionSnapshot_ActiveStreets-the_new_normal_for_public_space_FINAL.pdf

At the very least, the Tasmanian Government should put together a funding program and legislative assurance and guidance for state and local government departments to help them make our streets safer. Tasmania could look to the New Zealand or New South Wales funding programs as a template:

- New Zealand: <https://www.nzta.govt.nz/roads-and-rail/innovating-streets/covid-19-guidance/>
- New South Wales: <https://www.dpie.nsw.gov.au/premiers-priorities/great-public-spaces/streets/grants-for-councils>

There is the chance with our COVID-19 recovery to harness the increased interest in bicycle riding to help make the modal shift we need to set up our transport systems for the coming decades.

Quick roll-out cycleways can provide immediate job and safety benefits but can also build demand for permanent cycleways in the years to come.

If the government invests in safe pathways so people can ride to work, school, shops and services it can provide the final incentive needed for people to use bikes for short journeys to help reduce traffic congestion, support jobs and build a healthier community.