

Tonnes of Cars

This article is one of a series looking at island solutions to greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) and climate change. The One Tonne Challenge, part of the island's Community Energy Strategy, invites everyone to participate in identifying and reducing their individual contributions to GHG. You can sign up for the Challenge at the Earth Festival Society's Fall Fair booth, or call Marion 537-4567 for more information.

If you think that Salt Spring's roads are much busier now than they were in the good old days, say five years ago, you are not alone. And you are right. The total number of Salt Spring insured light vehicles has increased 10.5% in three years (to June 2003), or 3.5% per year. This is about double the reported population growth. The number of heavy commercial vehicles has more than doubled, going from 26 to 57, in the same period. Add to these numbers increases in tourist vehicles and off-island delivery trucks and it is easy to see why our quiet rural lanes are no longer so quiet.

The automobile is arguably the biggest threat to our island paradise; it is certainly the cause of much of our local air pollution and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. In 2002, our light vehicles produced 1,400 tonnes of carbon monoxide, 155 tonnes of volatile organic compounds, 145 tonnes of nitrous oxides, another 16 tonnes of nitrogen dioxide, plus 6 tonnes of sulphur oxides, 6 tonnes of methane, and 3 tonnes of particulate matter. These are all toxic materials. A walk along our main roads is no longer a way to get a breath of fresh air.

The climate change impact of our automobile use is not insignificant either. Salt Spring's GHG emissions from gasoline for 2002 were 39,000 tonnes. There are over 7,600 cars and pick-up trucks registered on Salt Spring, each one producing an estimated average of 5.2 Tonnes of GHG emissions each year. That works out to about 4.1 Tonnes for every man, woman and child living here. Our cars are also expensive to own and operate, and make walking and cycling on the main roads unpleasant and sometimes hazardous. As a community, and as individuals, we need to rethink our relationship with the automobile. We need some creative solutions.

The good news: it is possible to radically reduce automobile emissions by changing our driving habits. What is more, the solutions can be fun, and should increase the quality of island life! There are three simple principles involved:

Principle One: do not drive alone. The simplest way to halve your GHG emissions is to make sure there are always two people in the car. Make that four, and you have cut individual emissions by 75%! Not driving alone implies that you may actually have to talk to your neighbours, and arrange shopping days with friends in advance. Could be fun. Give rides to hitchhikers and find out what our young people are concerned about. Carpool to work. "[It's] pretty handy and saves a lot of money," says Alex Wright who rode with the Victoria vanpool for over ten years. This vanpool leaves on the 6:20am ferry, returns on the 5pm. Monthly membership spaces are currently full, but you can check on the 6:20 ferry to see if there is space. If you'd like organize a second Victoria vanpool, contact the Jack Bell Foundation at 250-380-RIDE for more information. We also need vanpools for people commuting into Ganges or Fulford.

Tonnes of Cars

Tip: when picking up hitchhikers be sure to give other road users plenty of warning before pulling aside, use your indicators, and pull well off the road. Avoid obstructing other traffic.

Principle Two: practice car-free days. Make it a habit to not use the car one or two (or more) days a week. Instead, simply stay at home, or arrange a ride with a neighbour (see Principle One) walk, or cycle.

In Your Neighbourhood: Greenwoods employee Margareta Nordine chooses to cycle from Fernwood to Ganges four days a week. Nearing retirement, she has been cycle commuting on Salt Spring for at least 20 years. “I grew up in Sweden,” she says, “where people bike...good bike lanes and bike paths are part of the culture.”

Get into the habit of making just one or two trips to town each week instead of four or five, which, if you are like me, will involve better planning and more lists! There are creative alternatives to the car; some friends of mine like to kayak to the Saturday Market, which is one way to avoid Saturday parking problems. If the Ganges Hill seems too daunting for out-of-condition muscles, try an electric bike. It does not eliminate the need to pedal, but it sure takes the edge off the hills. Moving house? If you can relocate within easy walking or cycling distance of Ganges and / or work, car-free days can become the rule rather than the exception.

In Your Neighbourhood: Musician Alan Miceli walks to his day job, five days a week, year-round. “When I lived 7 km [from Ganges] I used to bike,” he says, “but now that I live so close [1 km], biking wasn’t giving me sufficient exercise, so I walk.”

Principle Three: maximize vehicle performance. Make sure your vehicle is getting the best possible fuel consumption. If you can trade in your old gas guzzler for a hybrid or Smart Car, or for a fuel efficient Honda Civic or Toyota Echo, you will have halved, or better, your fuel consumption and emissions.

In Your Neighbourhood: In 2002, 71 year old islander Dorothy Cutting drove her Hybrid Honda Civic to Ottawa to raise awareness about climate change and Robert Hunter’s book ‘2030: Confronting Thermageddon in Our Life Time’.

A new fuel-efficient car can be very affordable if shared with others through a membership in a car co-op. An arrangement could be established with the Victoria Car Co-op (250)995-0265, or the Cooperative Auto Network (CAN) (604)685-1393. On Cortes Island, the CAN currently provides a car to car co-op members. If trading in your car is not an option, simple things like good driving habits (no idling for longer than 10 seconds, avoiding rapid acceleration and braking, and high speeds), maintaining correct tire pressures, not using the air-conditioning, and servicing the car regularly will combine to give optimum performance and fuel savings of up to 10% or more. If you can find them, ethanol-gasoline blends and biodiesel will also reduce emissions from conventional engines.

Tonnes of Cars

In Your Neighbourhood: Robin Annschild has had her diesel engine converted so that it now runs on used cooking oil from Moby's. She is chair of the island's biodiesel group.

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If Salt Springers get serious about addressing our automobile use, we will have gone a long way towards meeting our Kyoto commitments and we will be preserving the quality of island life at the same time.

For more GHG reducing ideas, copies of 'Reduce Your Vehicle's Polluting Emissions' and 'Auto Smart' are available free of charge at Pretzel Motors.

Useful Websites: Auto Smart Ratings www.oeenrcan.gc.ca/autosmart

GHG Calculators --- www.onetonneless.ca

www.clearwater.org/carbon.html

www.energyalternative.ca/sub_pages/AtmosphericCarbon.html

www.climatechange.gc.ca