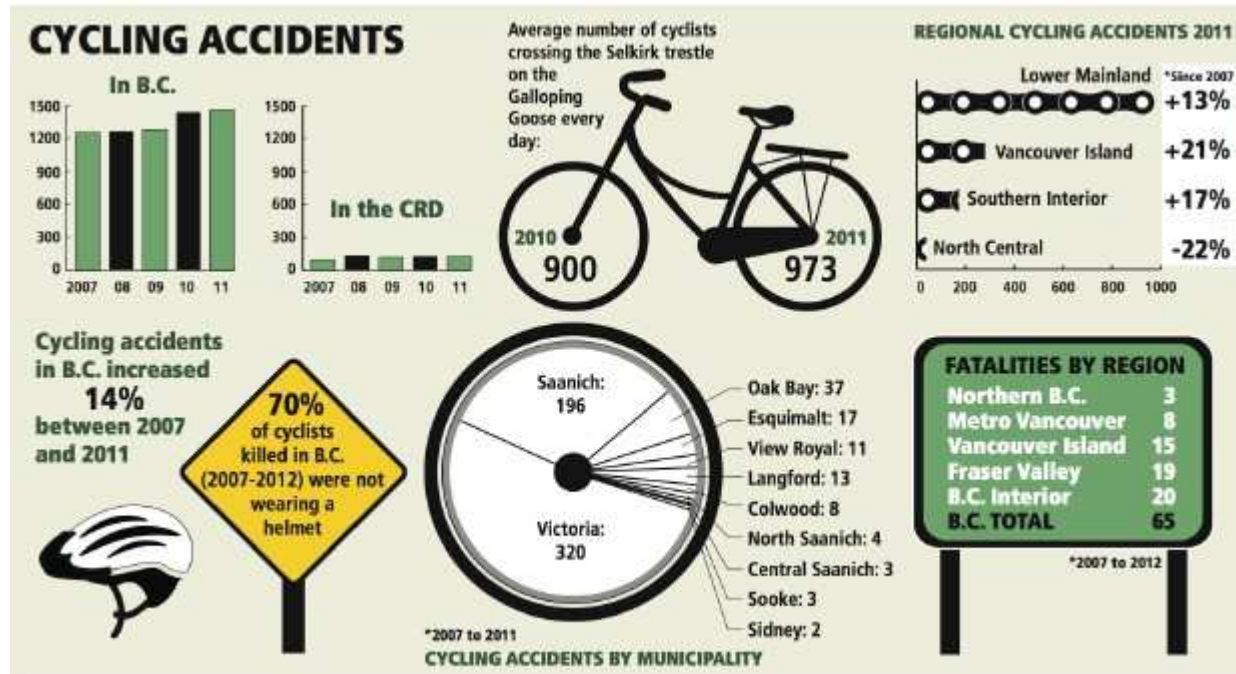


High Island ridership comes with a price: Crashes take a jump

BY DEREK SPALDING, TIMES COLONIST JUNE 24, 2012



Cycling Accidents

Photograph by: Marc Furney, Times Colonist, ICBC, Coroners Service, CRD

Cycling accidents on Vancouver Island are rising at a faster rate than in any other region in B.C., which has some experts questioning a recent push to relax mandatory bike-helmet laws.

Crash statistics from the Insurance Corporation of B.C. show cycling accidents on the Island jumped 21 per cent from 230 incidents in 2007 to 280 in 2011.

The numbers put the region ahead of even the Lower Mainland, which saw a 13 per cent increase and where groups are lobbying to eliminate mandatory helmet laws in order to increase ridership for Vancouver's proposed bikeshare program.

Critics of the law say helmets deter people from riding bikes, an argument questioned by David Hay, a Vancouver injury lawyer.

Hay has worked extensively with cyclists and has become an advocate for improving bike safety. He questioned the merits of studies that show helmets reduce ridership.

"I just don't think there are any satisfactory statistics which persuasively prove the helmet laws reduce numbers," he said.

"They may, and I'm not suggesting that's a flawed position, I just don't think that anyone can say that any study is conclusive on that issue."

Hay said there was no question that helmets reduce cycling injuries, but believes infrastructure provides the greatest safety benefit.

He noticed a significant drop in business after Vancouver opened its bike-only lanes, indicating to him that separating cyclists from vehicles is the best way to improve safety.

That view is echoed by Kay Teschke, a professor at the school of population and public health at the University of B.C.

"People want infrastructure that is away from traffic, either physically by a barrier or - they want bike paths," she said. "That's what will increase cycling for sure, and the good news is that it will also decrease our injury rate."

Teschke's research contributes to a national snapshot of bike safety and bike ridership through the Cycling in Cities research program, which ranks Victoria as the best of 10 Canadian cities for "bikeability." The B.C. capital is followed closely by Vancouver and Montreal.

Researchers looked at several variables to come up with the scores, including the availability of separated bike lanes, the number of hills and how connected bike routes are to amenities.

Teschke said there was no question that the biking infrastructure in Victoria has led to its high ridership levels. In the 2006 census, Victoria had the highest rate of commuters using bikes to get to work at 5.6 per cent, compared with 2.4 in Kingston, Ont., and Saskatoon, and 1.7 in Vancouver.

Paul Hasselback, the medical health officer for the Vancouver Island Health Authority, agreed that the separation of vehicles and bikes would reduce injuries and increase ridership, but urged all cyclists to wear helmets.

"Anyone on a bicycle should wear a helmet, whether it's regulated or not," he said. "Anyone thinking otherwise is creating a risk."

The latest data from VIHA supports ICBC's numbers, showing that hospitalizations from bike accidents have increased year over year on the Island.

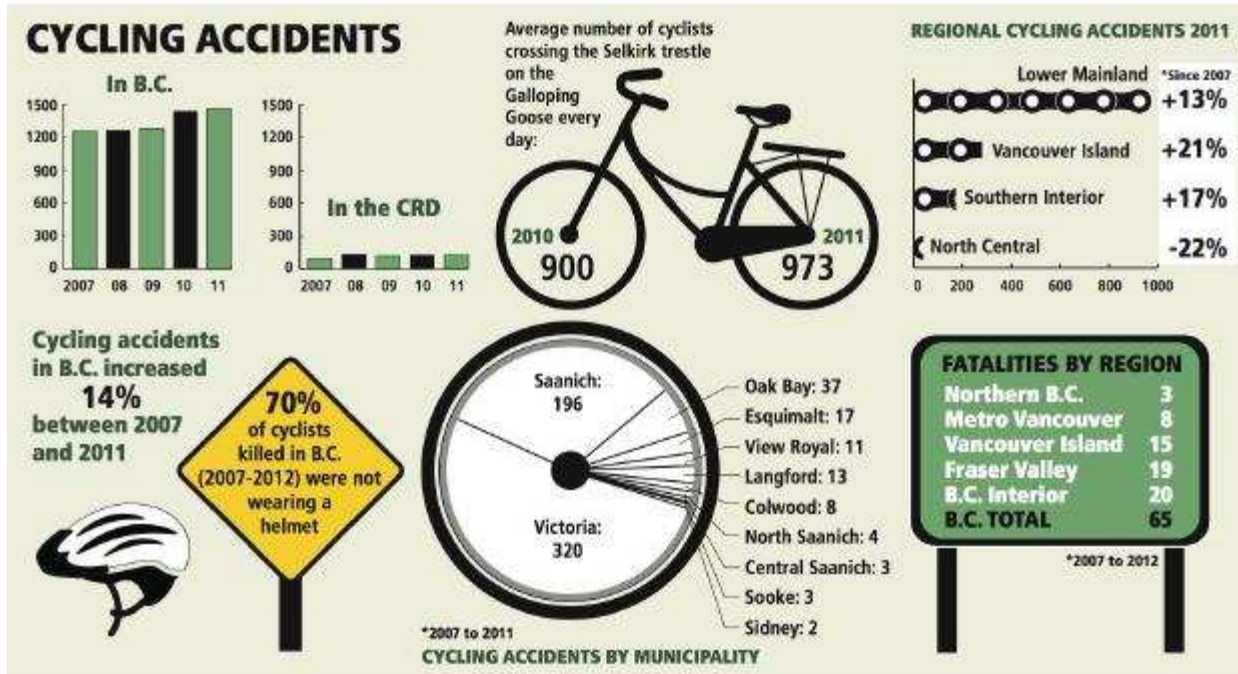
There were 252 hospital admissions from April 2009 to March 2010, compared with 299 during the same months in 2011 and 2012.

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