

Remarks by Eleanor McMahon, CEO Share the Road Cycling Coalition

Coroner's Review Launch

June 18, 2012

I want to start by thanking Dr. Cass and his team. Ontario is blessed with a competent and highly professional public service and the office of the chief coroner represents the best of the best. Dr. Cass, I watched you navigate this review with skill, clarity and considerable compassion.

The result is a series of recommendations that will serve to shape the future of our province and the safety of it's' citizens with clarity, competence and empathy. And for that you – and your team – are deserving of our tremendous thanks.

For our part, we were honoured to be chosen as members of this distinguished panel of caring professionals. It has been a pleasure to serve in this capacity – and to work with a group who demonstrated such dedication and passion – all in the interest of saving lives, and preventing the kind of impact that sadly, we experienced personally.

In speaking to you today I wear many hats. I am a cyclist and a cycling advocate, a public policy professional who has worked around governments of all levels for the past 25 years and consequently is blessed with knowledge, skills and abilities that have been very useful in engineering the kind of change that we need to see in our province for cycling – and cyclists – to be able to ride safety and with due consideration of their fellow Ontarians. The other hat I am wearing this morning is as a representative of the 129 families

Six years ago on June 6, 2006 my husband Greg Stobbart, a police officer with 24 years of service, and a sergeant with the Ontario Provincial Police left our home on his bicycle on a beautiful sunny day.

My last words to him were about the Ride ahead – part of his training for the upcoming triathlon season. We spoke at about 10:30 about what a beautiful day it was, and how much he was looking forward to his Ride. Sadly that was our last conversation. He was hit by a truck driver just after noon, and died later that evening as I held his hand in hospital and watched his life slip away. He was 44.

His death, like the other 128 souls lost between 2006 and 2010 was entirely preventable. In the anguish of the months that followed, we realized that there must be some way to – not only honour his life and his career as a public servant charged with keeping our communities safe – but also prevent others from experiencing the same tragic circumstance. In his memory we worked to pass amendments to the Highway Traffic Act – Greg’s Law – in 2009. Greg’s Law, which stipulates increased penalties for suspended drivers, became the law of Ontario in 2010.

After two years of research and discussion, we launched the Share the Road Cycling Coalition in 2008 and since that time have worked to advocate for safer roads, build a cohesive and effective movement comprising the growing list of cycling enthusiasts and dedicated public servants across Ontario, and change the conversation.

That last point has in many ways been the most critical. As the report mentions, bicycling is often a highly polarized conversation, filled with vitriol, blame and finger pointing. This over-heated and often irrational environment has made politicians skittish about change – they worry that finding a solution that “accommodates cyclists” means special treatment, and that means sacrificing motorists.

Except here’s the thing. It is not a bicyclists vs. motorist issue as it turns out – but in fact it is us, we.

And, we are all human beings trying to navigate roads that are increasingly crowded, and in many cases ones which haven’t keep pace with the need to accommodate everyone – for the safety of us all. This is not a discussion of the few – but of all of us.

In a poll of Ontarians we conducted a few months ago, driving a car regularly is just about as common for cyclists (80%) as it is among the total population (83%) - underlining an important fact behind the so-called 'war' between drivers and cyclists – they are largely the same people. Further, 89% of Ontarians agree that “sharing the road” is a mutual responsibility. 58% of Ontarians said they would cycle more often if they had safer places to ride – a confirmation that the potential of leveraging the benefits of that pent up demand is very powerful. Finally, 70 % of Ontarians support an enhanced provincial role by our Ontario government.

In the context of this often polarized conversation, answers have been elusive – much of the dialogue has been about the various reasons why we can't – or shouldn't accommodate bicyclists. Ontarians want this to change, and today's review presents a powerful opportunity to undertake that change.

While Coroner's investigations happen sadly in the context of tragic loss, there is tremendous potential here for safer roads for us all. To politicians who are not willing to accept that a growing number of Ontarians want to ride their bike to work, school or play I say – the time for action is long overdue, the blame game is not an acceptable refuge, divide and conquer will not work, will not move us forward.

To Ontarians the message is clear: respect and tolerance – not derision or criticism must be the tone we take from now on. Regardless of how people choose to get to work or recreate – and for some indeed, the bicycle is the only way for them to travel -- let's stop criticizing and focus instead on getting to the bottom of how we can make our roads safer for all. Let's face it: we're all human. There are bicyclists who make bad choices but who hasn't experienced bad decisions, careless driving or just plain goofy decisions on the part of motorists too. As bicyclists and as motorists we need to recognize our mutual responsibility, and we need to insist that our politicians focus not on the next election – but on the next generation. Creating a safer environment requires dialogue, persistent and political will. We put men on the moon – we can do this.

And so yes, we have issues but we now have the power of the Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario telling us what needs to be done. Indeed, these solutions have been under discussion for some time by those of us who work in this arena. We applaud this report in part because we issued one of our own -- a report on bicycling in Ontario in 2010 -- and it contained 8 of the 14 recommendations before us today. We all know what needs to be done.

I am hoping that with the launch of today's report we will begin to move to a new paradigm. One where a common basis for moving forward is one rooted in a desire for safer roads for all, the protection of our most vulnerable and one where we focus on what we have in common -- not on what divides us -- and urge our policy makers to do the same.

Yes, cycling can sometimes be unsafe. But for the most part is a safe, enjoyable activity with tremendous potential benefits to individuals -- and to our province. We have the potential in our hands to make cycling -- and our communities, more liveable, more economically viable and safer. Let's not squander that opportunity.

The time for talking, for wondering if we should or shouldn't is over -- we should, and we must.