

Halifax mayor aware of his environment

By MICHAEL LIGHTSTONE City Hall Reporter | FIVE QUESTIONS

HE HAS ONE CAR, is known to pick up litter, promotes public transit, is sensitive to global warming-related matters and would love to see Halifax regional council approve a proposal for a fast commuter ferry to the downtown core, serving Bedford and its environs, but Mayor Peter Kelly is no David Suzuki.

Though not an environmental activist, the mayor is in tune with green issues and has encouraged public acceptance of environmentally friendly changes that have come to Halifax Regional Municipality over the years.

With respect to global warming, the environmental foundation started by Mr. Suzuki, a scientist, broadcaster and author, says "time is ticking for world leaders to reach a climate agreement."

World leaders are meeting in Denmark this week and next to discuss climate change.

The Federation of Canadian Municipalities plans to release a report on the municipal role in fighting harmful greenhouse gas emissions. It will be posted on the federation's website Tuesday.

Prior to the start of the international climate change summit — it begins today in Copenhagen — The Chronicle Herald asked Mr. Kelly about metro's response to greenhouse gas emissions.

Q: You've talked about getting commuters to leave their vehicles at home and use public transit. Business folks in downtown Halifax have said that parking needs to be improved to entice more people to drive downtown. Isn't that a mixed message?

A: At first blush, yeah, it is a mixed message and we have to make sure we do the proper education process to communicate the need to reduce the use of personalized vehicles, and try to encourage (commuters) to go on transit. In Portland, Ore., by the way . . . they have reduced (greenhouse gas emissions) by introducing bike lanes and parking areas for bicycles. They took out parking meter spots for (vehicles) and they put in bikes, because two parking meter spots can house about 30 bikes. . . . They have found that it . . . brought increased business to local merchants, especially restaurants and coffee shops.

Q: Why doesn't the city have proper bike lanes, or paths — areas separated or blocked off from traffic — not just white lines painted on road surfaces?

A: For us (in metro), there are a couple of issues of constraint. One is that with HRM being an older municipality, we have some narrow streets in some areas, which does not easily accommodate the use (of bicycles) beyond the pavement marking. And in some areas . . . there are bike trails where cars are not allowed there. So we have them in some spots, but we don't have them in widespread areas. . . . If we are going to encourage more bike use, then we have to also become more bike-friendly. . . . It may be that it's a compilation of things that may make (cycling) better.

Q: So many people drive into the city alone. Should single-occupant commuting vehicles be ticketed or taxed to help cut greenhouse gas emissions?

A: In a perfect world, that might be an option but in our demographic and geographic reality we have to also allow for the understanding that there are not a whole lot of options at this time. And so we need to continue to invest in public transit, and that's what we're doing. . . . Educate (residents and workers) about sustainability and the reduction of greenhouse gas, and encourage people to get out of their cars and jump on transit. . . . We have to keep in mind that geographically we are the largest municipality in the country . . . and we have to acknowledge that we are not the most bike-friendly municipality at this time and we are continuing to invest in transit, but we are not where we need to be yet.

Q: What's the percentage of HRM's fleet of cars, vans and pickup trucks that are hybrid?

A: I don't have the percentage, but here's what I understand (the municipality has): we have six Smart cars, which are not hybrid but they are very fuel efficient, we have four hybrid (sport utility vehicles) which are used in the transit division and we have two, soon-to-come, hybrid (Metro Transit) buses.

Q: How many cars do you own, and what kind is it/are they?

A: I have one car that I use. . . . It is a 2006 Pontiac G6, it has around 130,000 kilometres on it. . . . It's a four-door, (black), and it's used very extensively as I criss-cross through HRM weekly, and it gets me from point A to point B. . . . Perhaps, depending on the cost factor, I'd look at the Toyota hybrid or the Honda hybrid as a potential (replacement vehicle). It depends on affordability and other factors, but if at all possible I will certainly look at them.

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