

Planners' Guide To Victoria

Highlights For Urban Exploration And Discovery
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Figure 1 City of Victoria



(www.hellobc.com/NR/rdonlyres/5F31CA9D-4FF3-4073-8D60-E59B066C0105/0/victoria.jpg)

Summary

This short guide describes general attributes that make urban areas successful, and ways these are expressed in Victoria, British Columbia.

Introduction

I love my city, Victoria, British Columbia, and enjoy showing it to visitors, particularly those interested in urban planning issues. This short guide describes general attributes that make urban areas successful and the ways these are expressed in Victoria.

A city is a concentration of diverse human interactions. This can have various costs associated with increased congestion and conflict, plus numerous economic, social and environmental benefits associated with increased opportunities for interaction and exchange. A successful city minimizes these costs and maximizes benefits by encouraging the following attributes:

- *Accessibility.* A city maximizes accessibility by locating diverse activities close together, including housing, recreation and entertainment, retail, employment, and transportation terminals. In a successful city, most commonly-needed services and activities are close by, preferably within walking distance, of where most people live and work. A significant body of economic research indicates that cities, by improving accessibility and reducing transportation costs, increase economic efficiency and competitiveness, which is called economies of agglomeration.
- *Diversity.* A city includes a diverse variety of people, activities, industries and opportunities. This requires, for example, diverse housing types and prices (apartments, townhouses and single-family), businesses (manufacturing, office, retail), transport options (walking, cycling, taxi, automobile and public transit), and recreation and entertainment options (sports and art facilities, various types of parks and recreation centers, etc.).
- *Community cohesion.* It is insufficient to that diverse people be physically close together, the value of a city results when they have positive interactions, for example, if children interact with adults, wealthy people interact with poor people, and people of many different cultural backgrounds interact in positive ways. This builds knowledge, trust and economic opportunities. The technical term for positive interactions among people in a community is *community cohesion*.

These attributes do not occur accidentally, they result from policies and planning practices that support compact and mixed development, multi-modalism, adaptive reuse and infill, multi-culturalism, community involvement, infrastructure investments, and efforts to protect and enhance the public realm (such as sidewalks and parks).

Traditional urban planning practices tend to reflect these principles. Suburban planning practices do not. Suburban planning tends to separate activities and stratify people, encourages sprawl and automobile-dependency, and does little to facilitate positive interactions among diverse people. Of course, suburban homogeneity and isolation provide benefits, particularly to wealthier motorists who can afford the additional transport costs, but they also impose economic, social and environmental costs. I believe that the optimal development pattern for most people, and for society overall, is a successful urban environment (see box on the following page).

Victoria (including adjacent core jurisdictions of Oak Bay and Esquimalt, but excluding outlying suburbs) is a traditional urban area which reflects these attributes. This is not to ignore the problems we face or the positive features of other communities, but I believe that Victoria can offer useful ideas and inspiration to planners. I hope that, as an urban explorer, you will enjoy and learn from your visit here.

Urban Living Benefits and Costs

The following are major benefits and costs of urban living based on eighteen years residing in Victoria.

Benefits

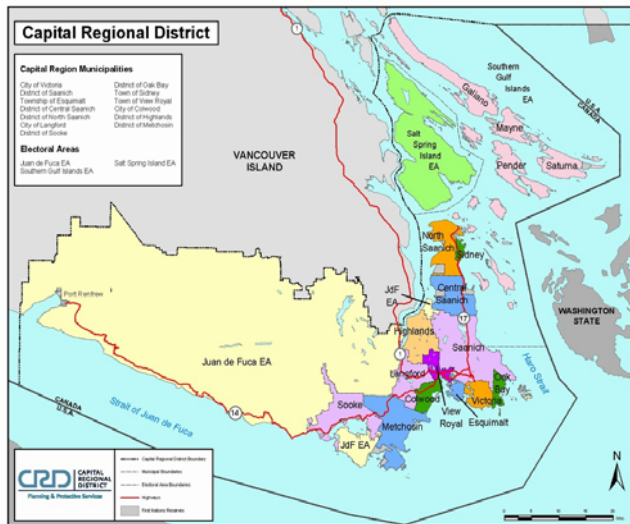
- *Transportation cost savings.* Because of land use accessibility (most commonly-used services are located nearby) and multi-modalism (good walking and cycling conditions, good public transit and taxi services, stores that deliver), it is easy to minimize automobile costs. We owned one car while our children were young and for the last four years have been car-free. As a result, we save thousands of dollars annually and various stresses associated with automobile ownership.
- *Safety and health.* Our community has low traffic risk. Our children and most of their friends have no drivers' licenses during their teen years, and none have been killed or disabled in car crashes. Because we walk and bicycle for transport and have a dog that requires two daily walks, we typically achieve 60 minutes or more a day of moderate physical activity. You should see our legs!
- *Mobility options for non-drivers.* Because of our diverse transport system, non-drivers can easily travel independently. Our teenage children required minimal chauffeuring, and need no car when attending university. Victoria is an excellent place for people with disabilities.
- *Diverse activities and services.* Virtually any activity or service we could want are available within a 20-minute walk or 5-minute bike ride: abundant and diverse shops and restaurants, pubs, theaters, churches and synagogues, boat rentals, ferries and sea planes, parks and trails. Victorians tend to tolerate diversity, including various interests, hobbies, cultural traditions and lifestyles.
- *Economic diversity.* Like many urban regions, Victoria has a diverse economy, including tourism and retirement, government and business administration, education and research, and manufacturing. As a result, its economy is relatively resilient and wages are relatively high.
- *Greenspace.* Victoria has good urban greenspace, with many parks and gardens. Because the region has policies to preserve openspace, there are farms and wilderness parks within a 20-minute drive, 30-minute bus ride or 40-minute bike ride from our house.
- *Community cohesion.* Because we live in a compact, mixed neighborhood, and walk and bicycle a lot, we have many local friends and acquaintances. We know most residents on our street, the workers in many nearby shops, and even commuters who walk by our home on their way downtown.

Costs

- *Costly housing.* We could not afford to purchase our current home now – we would need to buy a smaller home or condominium – although this will benefit us when we sell our house in the future.
- *Neighborhood noise.* We sometimes hear traffic noise, loud music, dog barking or chicken clucking from nearby homes.
- *Limited gardening.* Because land prices are high and most lots are shaded by nearby trees and buildings, gardening opportunities are limited. Most urban properties have only a few sunny areas so gardens are small and somewhat limited in variety.
- *Street problems.* Our home is located a few blocks from *Our Place* (described below), the city's consolidated service center for homeless people, plus various group homes for people with mental and addiction problems. As a result there are often people panhandling and sleeping in parks nearby, and there is sometimes illegal drug use. This is primarily a perception problem: most homeless and addicted people are harmless and shy, we have never personally experienced threats or crime.

Victoria, British Columbia

This section describes Victoria's basic geography and history.



Victoria is a medium-size city located on southern Vancouver Island in British Columbia, a region with a relatively mild climate.

Fort Victoria was established in 1843 as a Hudson's Bay Company trading post and administrative center. It became a busy commercial center during the 1858 gold rush, and was incorporated in 1862, making it one of the oldest of west coast cities. It grew into a middle-size city, with about 80,000 municipal residents and about 330,000 residents in the Capital Regional District, which includes a dozen other municipalities (Figure 2).

Victoria has a diverse economy: it is the provincial capital, a popular tourist and retirement destination, has two universities, a major naval base, and has various other industries.

Most Victoria neighborhoods (Downtown, James Bay, Fairfield, Fernwood and Esquimalt) developed before 1950 and so reflect traditional urban design features: a grid street system, sidewalks, mixed use (housing and commercial activities on the same block and sometimes in the same buildings), diverse housing types (apartments and single-family housing), and relatively narrow and lower speed arterials (two traffic lanes, and speeds under 40 kilometers per hour). Unlike most North American cities, Victoria did not develop major, grade-separated highways through the downtown and so avoided their negative impacts.

Between 1890 and 1948 the city had a streetcar system for local travel (Figure 3), plus intercity rail lines connecting other towns and cities. This system guided development. Many of the routes are now major arterials and many of the stops are popular mixed-use urban villages, such as Oak Bay, Cook Street Village, Fernwood Village and Esquimalt.

Other nearby communities have somewhat different styles. Oak Bay, to the east, is considered elite and exclusive. Esquimalt, to the west, is considered poorer and more industrial. Saanich, to the north, and the Western Communities (View Royal, Colwood, Langford, and Metchosin), to the west, are automobile-oriented suburbs with some walkable centers. The Gulf Islands, to the north, are considered idealic, rural communities. British Columbia has relatively strong farmland preservation policies (called the agricultural land reserve, or ALR) which limits urban-fringe development. There are often tensions among different jurisdictions and interest groups concerning regional planning issues.

Figure 3 Victoria Streetcar Lines (<http://vihistory.uvic.ca/content/maps/mapsdl.php>)



Victoria had a streetcar system which guided development. Many of the routes are now major arterials and many of the stops are mixed-use urban villages.

Getting Around

There are many ways for visitors to explore Victoria.

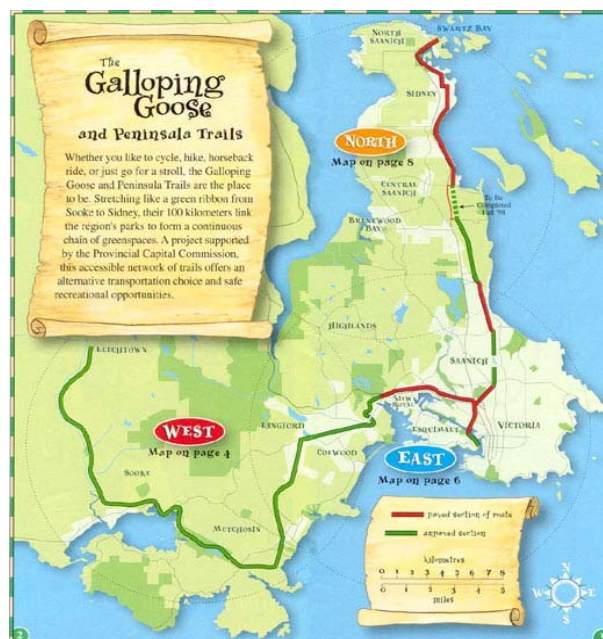
Walking (www.victoria.ca/visitors/wlkngr.shtml)

As previously discussed Victoria is very walkable, you just need a map and comfortable shoes.

Bicycle

Bicycling is an ideal way to explore Victoria and its region. There are several bicycle rental companies located downtown (<http://cyclebc.ca>).

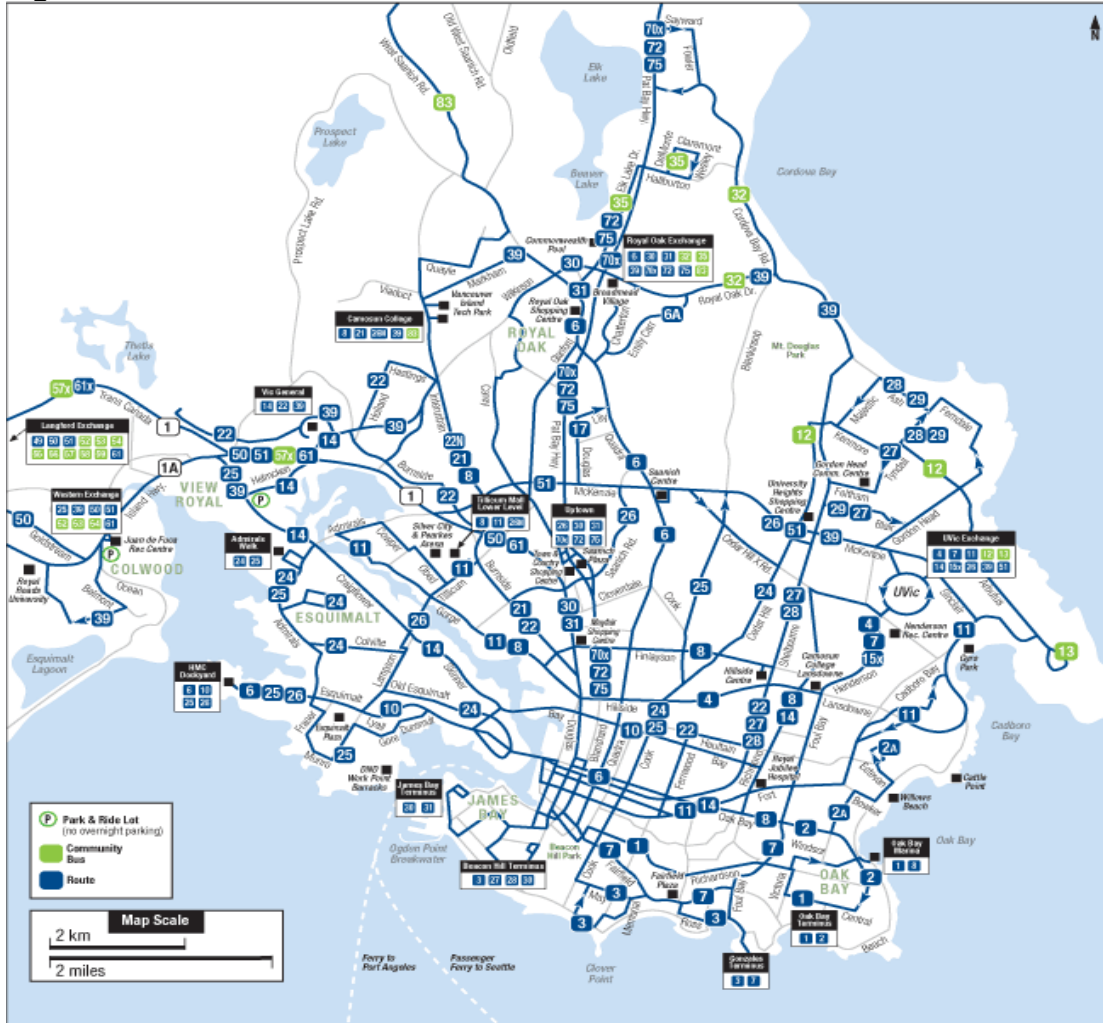
The city has an extensive network of on-road bicycle lane, plus the regional trail system (www.gallopinggoosetrail.com), illustrated to the right. Even a short walk or ride through Vic West (the western side of Victoria Harbor) is enjoyable. A longer ride (10-60 kilometers) either north or west passes through beautiful suburban areas, with many opportunities to eat and drink along the way.



Bus (www.transitbc.com)

BC Transit provides service around the Capital Regional District, as illustrated in Figure 4. The basic adult fare is \$2.50 per trip or \$7.75 per day.

Figure 4 BC Transit Routes



BC Transit uses double-decker buses on major routes, which are particularly enjoyable if you can get a top front seat (Joni Mitchell was crazy), especially for a nighttime highway ride, for example, the #50 or #60 bus to Langford.

The University of Victoria and Camosun College participate in the U-Pass program (www.uvss.uvic.ca/services/u-pass), which means that most students have unlimited use of local bus services. As a result, you are likely to meet many happy students on the buses.



Current Planning Issues

Victoria and nearby communities are engaged in various planning programs, described below. All encourage use of alternative modes and create more accessible, multi-modal communities, but all face significant obstacles.

The Capital Regional District (www.crd.bc.ca)

The Capital Regional District (CRD) has ongoing regional transport and land use planning programs. The CRD has a weak mandate and little dedicated funding, and there are often conflicts between urban and suburban interests. As a result, there is often inconsistency between strategic objectives and individual short-term decisions.

City of Victoria Official Community Plan (www.shapeyourfuturevictoria.ca)

The City of Victoria is currently engaged in updating its Official Community Plan (OCP), which establishes strategic policies. This plan envisions development of walkable, complete neighborhoods where residents are within convenient walking distance of commonly-used services. It includes detailed analysis of various issues (affordable housing, efficient transport, food security, planning process, etc.) and specific policies and planning guidance.

Rapid Transit (www.busonline.ca/vrrt)

BC Transit is currently engaged in planning a regional rapid transit system that is expected to include some combination of light rail transit (LRT), bus rapid transit (BRT), incremental transit service improvements, and supportive land use development policies. There is currently considerable debate concerning whether LRT would be cost effective.

NMT Planning (www.crd.bc.ca/regionalplanning/transportation/cycling-walking/index.htm)

Victoria has high rates of non-motorized transport (NMT, i.e., walking and cycling and their variants such as wheelchair use), in part due to previous investments in facilities such as sidewalks and crosswalks, trails, bike lanes and bicycle parking (our mild climate and compact development pattern also helps), and it continues to implement NMT improvements. However, some of the most important corridors (such as downtown to the University of Victoria) still lack bikeways, in part due to local opposition.

Parking Policy Reforms

The city has no minimum parking requirement downtown or in the Harris Green neighborhood. As a result, developers are building moderate-priced apartments and condominiums with relatively few (typically 0.5 spaces per unit), unbundled parking: residents purchase or rent the housing unit, and rent separately the number of parking spaces they want. This has become relatively common in major cities. Victoria is starting to implement this and other parking management strategies.

Johnson Street Bridge Replacement (www.victoria.ca/cityhall/johnson-st-bridge.shtml)

A 2009 identified extensive corrosion, mechanical and electrical system deterioration, and seismic vulnerability in the Johnson Street Bridge. The City Council approved a replacement plan. A citizen petition forced a referendum on project funding, which was subsequently approved, but the project continues to be controversial (<http://johnsonstreetbridge.org>).

Features Of Interest To Planners

Victoria has several features of interest to people concerned with urban development issues.

Urban Design

As an older city which retains its pedestrian and transit-oriented design features, Victoria illustrates the value to users and society of traditional urban design: compact, mixed development with sidewalks and urban villages. When we ask tourists, “What did you do when you visited Victoria?” most answer, “We walked around.” When we ask young people, people with disabilities and seniors why they want to move to Victoria, they often report that the combination of mild weather, good sidewalks and public transit services make it easy to get around without a car. Victoria continues to benefit from the legacy of neighborhood commercial districts that developed when the city had a streetcar network, including Oak Bay, Cook Street Village, Fernwood Village, and more recently, Quadra Village. These are desirable places to live, particularly for people who cannot or prefer not to drive.

Non-Motorized Transportation

Victoria is one of the most walkable and bikeable cities in Canada due to the combination of mild weather, compact development and good facilities. You are likely to see a large quantity and diversity of users, including wheelchairs, rollators, scooters, strollers, dog walkers, bicycles and skateboards. This contributes to relatively low rates of automobile ownership and use.

Strong Downtown

Downtown Victoria retains a significant portion of regional commercial activity, including jobs, tourism, entertainment and retail. It is also an important transportation hub, with ferries, float planes, local and regional bus connections. In recent years the downtown and adjacent neighborhoods have experienced significant residential growth. This makes the downtown a vibrant, attractive and relatively safe place, although by no means perfect.

(In)Affordable Housing

Housing inaffordability is a major regional problem. Victoria has a relatively large supply of cheaper apartments, mostly built by private developers between 1940 and 1970 (plus some beautiful examples of older apartments), but this stock expanded little in recent decades, driving up prices. The City also has a moderate supply of subsidized *social housing*, mostly constructed through federal and provincial programs between 1970 and 1990, but little since, leading to shortages and long wait lists for qualifying households. Although more middle- and higher-priced housing is being built, high prices force many lower-income families to spend an excessive portion of their income on housing, or leave the city for more isolated housing, and increases homelessness and associated problems. Victoria is implementing various strategies to increase housing affordability and address homelessness problems:

- Allow and encourage secondary suites.
- Allow and encourage higher-density, lower-priced housing development in suitable areas, particularly along major public transit corridors.
- Provides reduced and more flexible parking requirements.
- Provide support for people at risk of homelessness
(www.victoria.ca/cityhall/departments_plnsph_hmlssn_pln.shtml).

Areas of Interest

This section describes some specific areas of interest to planners.

Downtown and Inner Harbor

Downtown Victoria is east and north of the Inner Harbor. Most visitors spend most of their time walking around this area.



It is a traditional downtown which includes tourist, retail, commercial, administrative and legislative buildings, plus a growing number of residences. There are currently about 3,000-5,000 residential units in the downtown area (depending on how it is defined), and this is projected to triple during the next two decades.

Walking around downtown you will see many different types of mid- and high-rise residential. Although some (particularly in the Humboldt Valley, east of the Conference Center) consists of timeshare apartments, most is owner rented or owner occupied. Some recent downtown area projects are relatively affordable (prices under \$250,000 per unit). You will also see some good examples of redeveloped heritage buildings, either completely or as facades. Since Victoria is in an earthquake zone, these buildings often require seismic upgrades (earthquake reinforcement). The City has a tax deferral program to offset some of these costs, to encourage heritage redevelopment.

The City plans to encourage more development along the Blanshard and Douglas street corridor north of downtown. This area is currently a mix of industrial and commercial. The proposed rapid transit route follows this corridor to Uptown, a major commercial center at the Victoria and Saanich border. It will therefore be an excellent location for transit-oriented development, including more retail, commercial and residential.

While downtown I recommend:

- Visiting the *Royal BC Museum* (www.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca), which offers good overviews of the Province's history and environment, and an outstanding exhibit of First Nations (Indian) artifacts.
- A meal or drink at *Vista 18* (www.vista18.com), a restaurant and bar on the 18th floor of the Chateau Victoria Hotel (740 Burdett Avenue), which offers a spectacular view of the region.
- Exploring *Beacon Hill Park*, a large and beautiful park at the edge of downtown.

Old Town

A shopping and entertainment district with many attractive heritage buildings, including Swans Restaurant and Hotel, and Market Square

Location

North side of downtown.

Why Interesting To Planners

This is an excellent example of historic preservation which balances, at least to some degree, current development needs.



Chinatown

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinatown,_Victoria)

A collection of heritage buildings and Chinese restaurants and stores.

Location

North side of downtown.

Why Interesting To Planners

This is an authentic ethnic neighborhood that has been maintained and redeveloped with an effort at heritage and cultural preservation.



Cook Street Village

A successful urban village in a relatively affluent neighborhood, with a compact center that contains commonly-used services, surrounded by various types of residential (single-family, townhouses, condominiums and apartments), and several parks. A legacy of Victoria's streetcar system.

Location

One kilometer southeast of downtown.

Why Interesting To Planners

Shows that urban villages can be functional and attractive.



Fernwood Village

A growing urban village in a less affluent neighborhood. This area is experiencing significant redevelopment, due in part to efforts by the Fernwood Neighborhood Resource Group (<http://fernwoodnrg.ca>), which purchased and rehabilitated the Cornerstone Building.

Location

One kilometer northeast of downtown.

Why Interesting To Planners

This illustrates a successful, community-lead urban redevelopment program.



Harris Green

Central neighborhood currently being developed with special planning policies created through the Harris Green Design Charrette (www.victoria.ca/cityhall/pdfs/departments_plnpub_hrrsgr.pdf), which allow and encourage higher-density, mixed use development, and eliminate minimum parking requirements.

Location

Just east of downtown.

Why Interesting To Planners

Demonstrates that, with supportive planning policies it is possible to develop successful, medium-density, mixed use neighborhoods.



Our Place (www.ourplacesociety.com)

Multiple social service center for homeless and at risk populations.

Location

Downtown, at 919 Pandora Avenue.

Why Interesting To Planners

Shows the advantages and problems that result from concentrated social services for high-need populations.



Congregation Emanu-El
(www.congregationemanu-el.ca)

Canada's oldest (founded 1863) continuously operating synagogue.

Location

Blanshard and Pandora, Downtown Victoria

Why Interesting To Planners

A beautiful, restored heritage building that continues in its original function. Tours available.



Langford

A suburban community working to create a downtown, become more multi-modal, and in other ways urbanize.

Location

20-kilometres west of Victoria. Take the #50, #51 or #61 bus, or bike the Galloping Goose Trail.

Why Interesting To Planners

A good example of an automobile-oriented bedroom community evolving into an independent, multi-modal town.



Sidney

A relatively affluent town, popular as a tourist destination and retirement community.

Location

North end of the Saanich Peninsula, 40 kilometers north of downtown. To get there, take the #70 or #72 Bus, or bicycle the Lochside Trail.

Why Interesting To Planners

An attractive, well established town.



VTPI Headquarters

Location

1250 Rudlin Street

Why Interesting To Planners

Todd Litman's home office. Contact me (litman@vtpi.org) if you want to visit; if I have time I'll show you some local hospitality.



Treasure Hunt

While exploring Victoria, try to find the following indications of a healthy community:

- Couples using mobility aids (wheelchair or rollator users walking together).
- Parents cycling with children, in bicycle seats, trailers, or riding in a group.
- Attractive pre-1950 apartment buildings (bay windows, decorative detailing, welcoming entranceways, etc.).
- High- and lower-priced, owned and rented, housing located on the same block.
- Pedestrian short-cuts (short pathways that connect streets).
- Well-designed pedestrian crossing, with refuge islands.
- Well-designed and well-used bike rack.
- Attractive 3- to 6-unit apartment or condominium in a residential neighborhood that recently replaced a single-family house.
- A well-used neighborhood park.
- A vibrant local shopping district with diverse shops and lots of pedestrians.
- A new high-rise condominium with moderate priced units (under \$250,000).
- A corner grocery store.
- A double-decker bus.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Doug Rhodes for excellent editing and corrections.

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Victoria Transport Policy Institute (www.vtpi.org)

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