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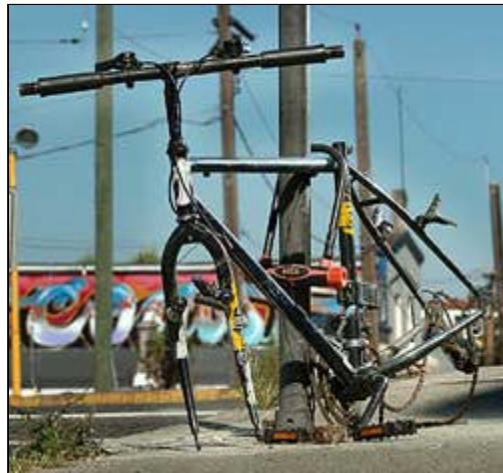


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NEWS



Vancouver has the worst bike theft rate of any major city in Canada. So why isn't anyone doing anything about it?
Photo-Dan Toulgoet

Lost ride

With almost no chance he'd be caught, the thief must have chuckled as he rode away on his spoils. In the early hours of July 8, someone broke into the canopy of a truck parked on York Avenue in Kitsilano and made off with Mina Nozar's red and black Kona Lisa racing bike.

OPINION

Mayor investigating top cop

Vancouver Police Chief Jamie Graham is being investigated over what is being called "an incident" that took place between him and city manager Judy Rogers.

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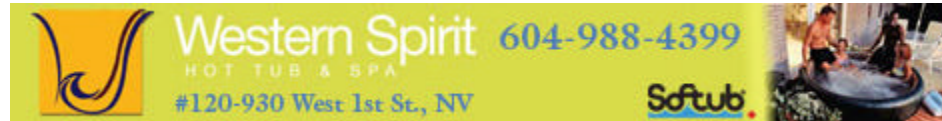
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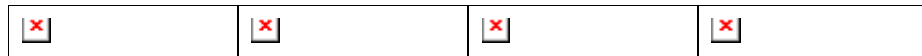
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NEWS



Sgt. Brian Green, who heads the VPD's bike squad, stands in a sea of stolen bikes recovered by the police department. Many of the bikes will be auctioned off this fall. Photo-Dan Toulgoet

Lost ride

by Rhiannon Coppin-contributing writer

With almost no chance he'd be caught, the thief must have chuckled as he rode away on his spoils. In the early hours of July 8, someone broke into the canopy of a truck parked on York Avenue in Kitsilano and made off with Mina Nozar's red and black Kona Lisa racing bike.

"I usually take it into my apartment," she says, "but that one night I was just feeling too tired-it was a long week-and I decided to leave it there [in the truck]."

Nozar, a postgraduate researcher at UBC's TRIUMF lab, intended to ride the bicycle in what would be her first triathlon, the Peach Classic in Penticton, the following week. She was devastated to wake up to find her truck door forced open and the bicycle missing.

"That morning I was in a state, wondering what I was going to do

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for the race. It took so much time, effort, and money trying to get the bike just right for me," she says during an interview on the patio of a caf, on Yew Street.

Nozar put \$2,500 into the bike and its upgrades since October. She used the bike for all her training, even riding it up Cypress Mountain twice.

Any cyclist (including this writer) will attest to the bond between rider and steed who have conquered any significant hill together. Nozar's Kona Lisa was far more than just a bike to her-they were a team.

That cyclists form close attachments to their rides makes the problem of bike theft all the more painful and disturbing.

Leave your bike locked outside overnight in Vancouver and you're effectively welcoming vultures to pick the skeleton clean of seat, wheels, handlebars, brakes and pedals. Take even reasonable precautions to protect your bicycle from theft, and you'll fare no better in one of Canada's top-three property crime hotspots.

Here in Terminal City, we live in a state of bicycles-under-siege with the highest rate of bike theft per capita of all the major cities in the country. That's why it's galling to learn there isn't much you can do to prevent bike pirates from moving in and plundering your treasure.

Many cyclists-who judge the chance of recovering their bikes as slim-have given up. Many don't know how to protect their bikes and don't bother to report when their bikes are stolen; those who do call in the crime often report feeling as though "the police did nothing." The Vancouver Police Department says it can't justify allotting resources to what appears to be a non-issue, and it can't counter the resale of stolen goods outside its jurisdiction. The city, meanwhile, purportedly wants to increase cycling's share in its transportation plans, and yet safe bike parking facilities remain woefully inadequate for most destinations. If bike theft is indeed a serious problem in supposedly bike-friendly Vancouver, many people believe all sides need to start treating it as such.

In Vancouver, thefts that the police have reported to Statistics Canada in 2004 numbered 3,703. (Toronto beat us with 5,295.) If the numbers don't seem high, insurance rates for bicycles reflect the risk of theft to the average owner.

"It costs \$100 insurance a year per bike, which tells you there is a theft problem," says Sgt. Brian Green, an avid racing cyclist who heads up the VPD bike squad, which is currently on hold due to staff re-assignments.

The total number of bicycle thefts reported in Canada in 2004 was about 60,000-down from the 108,000 stolen 30 years ago in 1977.

Why the decline? Far fewer bikes could be in circulation. Police could be doing a better job of targeting bike thieves, bicycle security systems could have improved, and the economy for pilfered bikes may have shrunk. But what is far more likely, according to the police, second-hand-bike dealers, and cycling activists, is that fewer victims report their losses.

In 2004, the VPD acquired 1,410 bicycles either as stolen or found property, returned a quarter of those to their rightful owners, auctioned off another 500, and scrapped the remainder that weren't tied up as evidence. This fall, Vancouver police are holding a second "annual" auction of recovered bicycles and goods collected since April. Police can't trace the owners and don't have the space to keep the bicycles any longer.

Property offices across the country wish that bike owners would record their bikes' serial number, usually found on the frame beneath the crank or on the back post.

"If you record the serial number and any police officer deals with that bike across the country, that bike is going to get back to you," Green says.

VPD spokesperson and cyclist Const. Tim Fanning offers an additional tip: Etching your drivers licence number on to your frame and parts can help ensure a speedy recovery.

"If I see someone riding a bike worth \$2,000 on skid row and they're selling crack, there's probably a good chance that's not their bike," he says.

"I flip it over and check the serial number, but maybe it hasn't been reported stolen yet because it was just stolen a few hours ago. If your driver's licence number is on it, I can check with you directly and it also gives me grounds to hang on to it."

The police don't actively hunt down suspicious-looking riders or stake out high-theft locations, which include Granville Island, the Central Library, the West End, Kitsilano Pool, and the UBC campus. These are dangerous areas to leave a bike. Owners who've recently lost bikes sometimes post notices of their loss on the online Craigslist site. Within the past month and a half, locations of thefts included a handful at UBC, a few from Granville Island, occasional spotting in East Vancouver (Boundary near Kingsway, Strathcona, the Drive), 10 from downtown (including a thief who absconded with a customer's bike temporarily parked well inside a sports store on Thurlow at Alberni), and a disturbing cluster of nine from within a small area of Kitsilano, north of Fourth Avenue. One woman had a pile of 18 locked bikes disappear from Strathcona in June. One man describes how his bike was gleaned July 7 from outside the Future Shop on Broadway: "News to me... U-locks can be simply twisted off using a pry-bar!" he writes.

Thieves with addiction problems tend to steal heavier bike frames, which are good for scrap, and anything they can re-sell on the sidewalk for \$10 or more. Amateur and professional thieves will go as far as breaking into homes to target more expensive bikes they can either unload via buy-and-sell services or by chopping them into their components.

In the past, Vancouver police have uncovered a smattering of professional chop shops. Last year, they discovered a BMX-only specialty operation with a few dozen bikes, but it paled in comparison to a 150-plus bike dismantling warehouse they found a few years before. And though the police once intercepted a van on its way to Edmonton full of high-end mountain bikes, these career-criminals aren't the norm-or at least aren't getting caught very often.

Most bike thieves aren't showy high-profile criminals whose apprehension brings glory on the evening news hour. Most bike thefts these days are attributed to small-time operators who, though perhaps apprehended, aren't likely to be charged with more than possession of stolen property. Unless a thief has been caught in the act, there is little chance he or she will be charged with the act of thievery. That's why the police are concentrating their efforts elsewhere.

"It comes down to, unfortunately, prioritizing, and we will put the resources into a crime if there is a good likelihood we're going to arrest somebody," Fanning says.

NPA Coun. Peter Ladner, whose bike was once stripped when he left it outside GM Place, and who lost a set of wheels within the past six months, disagrees that police don't have the resources to target bike crime.

"The police have a \$160 million budget, and it's their choice as to how they want to spend it," he says. "If they say they don't have the money-it's because it's not considered a priority."

Can the city do more to prevent bike thefts?

According to both Sgt. Green and the Vancouver Area Cycling Coalition, the city could take a big step by ensuring that bike racks aren't always hidden off in the bushes and that post-and-ring bike parking is installed more regularly on city sidewalks alongside parking meters. Many cyclists, looking up and down a block with no other option, erroneously believe locking their bicycle to a city sign post is safe, but in reality these poles unscrew at the base and can be lifted right out from between a bike and its lock.

Ladner believes cyclists should take more responsibility to protect their bikes.

"There are some new technologies out there now where you can put

GPS-global positioning system-chips on bikes so that if they do get stolen you can find out where they are," he says.

Unfortunately, current GPS and tracking technologies are neither undefeatable nor cheap, relying on a subscription-based or central tracking station model. And the city or police would need to be involved to make a bicycle tracking system available and affordable to any population of city cyclists.

The Victoria Police Department tried such a system out this year, using GPS trackers, video cameras, and stakeouts to nab several bike thieves in its inaugural "bait bike" program. Volunteers posted warning signs and distributed "This could be a Bait Bike" bicycle decals while the police manned stings on locked and unlocked bikes.

Police departments in the Netherlands, the UK, and California have also used the bait-bike idea to target problem offenders and deter bicycle crime.

But while a GPS-enabled bait bike watched by video cameras may be a good tool for luring the occasional thief, such a program has yet to shown it is a significant factor in reducing bicycle crime. Though Victoria police apprehended several suspects with ease-the first within 48 hours of the program's launch in March-they haven't continued with the program throughout the busiest bicycle season, citing a lack of resources during the busy summer months.

Meanwhile, police in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside routinely seize bikes from drug couriers or people transporting stolen goods. But just as soon as police seize the bikes, the culprits quickly replace them.

"We started taking the bikes from them, and then what we found is that they'd be out on the street the next day with another bicycle. So maybe we were contributing to the theft of bicycles by doing that," sighs Sgt. Green.

Those who attempt to unload their bicycles through pawnshops must first negotiate the City of Vancouver's Xtract property tracking database. By law, certain classes of second-hand dealers in Vancouver must enter information on acquisitions into the database and wait for clearance before reselling the goods. The Xtract system has alerted the police in the past to the whereabouts of \$100,000 worth of stolen pearls and \$40,000 worth of microscopes taken, and not reported stolen, from Douglas College. Since 2004, the police and the city have worked together to shut down second-hand dealers who haven't complied with the reporting by-law.

Barry Gilpin is happy to be in their good books. The president of the 19-year-old Cheapskates sporting-goods consignment store in Dunbar has complied with Xtract since its introduction five years ago. It wasn't difficult. Gilpin set up his business from the start in a

way that would help him avoid dealing with shady characters.

"We don't buy things outright-we sell only on consignment," he says.

"We only mail out cheques-you can not pick up a cheque here-and all the person's identification is recorded with respect to their name and address [from their driver's licence]."

Gilpin won't deal in bicycles worth more than \$1,000. The last time he did, thieves broke into the store for the high-end assemblies. Gilpin keeps a rack of recent acquisitions in the Cheapskates bicycle store on Dunbar Street. On a recent visit, the rack was holding dozens of bikes undergoing the 30-day waiting period. Const. Tim Fanning had brought in one of them.

Over the years Gilpin has used the system, Xtract identified a few bikes brought to the store for resale as stolen.

"In those cases the system worked the way it was supposed to and the person got their bike back. That's the way it should work," he says.

Unwary buyers seeking used bikes may also be contributing to the problem, whether attempting to buy from print or online classifieds, or from disreputable second-hand dealerships outside the city limits, where Vancouver's Xtract system and by-laws have no effect.

"I understand clearly why the Vancouver police would be frustrated," says B.C. Solicitor General John Les over the phone last week from Victoria.

"I believe it's only Vancouver, Chilliwack and Kelowna that have implemented the Xtract system, and it does mean that people could go to other cities to get rid of their stolen goods," he says.

But until the other municipalities get together and demand a common standard, Les won't overstep his bounds and impose new blanket regulations.

"I would like to see a bit more initiative by the municipalities across the province, perhaps in the form of a Vancouver resolution to be presented at the Union of B.C. Municipalities convention this fall asking for a province-wide implementation of Xtract. If that were to pass at UBCM, I'd happily go to work on that," says Les.

For now, cyclists are left mostly on their own. Without a serial number, they can't have their stolen bicycle listed in the nation-wide online CPIC database (www.cpic-cipc.ca). With only a description, and ideally a photo, theft victims try to probe the Vancouver Police Department Property Office (604-717-2726) along with whatever online postings they can find. Other than that, there

isn't much to do but talk to neighbours, check out pawnshops, and scour the streets.

It's why many bicycle owners have become resigned to accepting bike theft as fact of life.

Jim Stamper is searching for a green chopper bike he made himself, having miscalculated the risk when he locked it outside his Vernon Drive ceramics studio using only a cable lock.

"It's made out of piece of old junk bikes. There's no real value in the components: You can't break that bike down and sell it for parts," he says.

Stamper walked through the Downtown Eastside on his way home that day to look for it. There's no serial number on the hand-made bike, and Stamper doesn't think informing the police about the theft will do much good. "It's not like they're proactive about bike thieves," he says.

Although Stamper's acceptance of the theft may point to a learned helplessness, in which a large number of bikes are stolen in broad daylight and only a small percentage returned to their owners, he admits he's guilty of letting bike crime go unchallenged in his neighbourhood.

"One day walking down the alley I noticed out by the garage, by the trash, there was a whole whack of bike frames all cut in strange places: through the cross bar or through the down tube, where you might lock a U-lock," he says.

The stash has since been cleaned up, but as far as Stamper knows, no one reported it to the police.

"It would sure be nice to catch a few of them, but I don't think it will change [the situation]. People are stealing bikes not because they're professional bike thieves and this is their industry, they're stealing them because they're desperate and they need money for something," Stamper opines.

David Goodyke, who lives in a condo complex in the trendy South Main neighbourhood, has also grown complacent about losing his ride.

"The one thing that I think is the most disappointing is just how I've accepted that my bike gets stolen," he says over the phone.

He thought he knew enough to trust his mechanically sound but aesthetically ugly Red Trek road bike to the concrete-and-deadbolt-reinforced bike lockup in his building's basement: "I just assumed that it would be an OK place to leave a locked bike," Goodyke says.

When the 34-year-old landscape architect went to check on it a few

weeks later, he found a little piece of cable lock on the floor. The room had been cleared out of all its bikes and locks. He later discovered a bicycle swap meet was held the following weekend not far from his building. With no serial number and no faith in the system, Goodyke regretfully kissed his bicycle goodbye.

"People aren't surprised at all, people aren't worked up about it [bicycle theft] at all. It's just seen as a way of life, and that's a little bit sad," he says.

"I often wonder what I would do if I saw my bike," he adds.

Apparently others wonder as well. The Vancouver Craigslist site has been full of discussion and tips over the past few months about booby-trapping bicycles to deter or harm thieves, or baiting them to steal a bike and then greeting them with "batting practice."

"There have been a few posts about people saying they're going to be meting out vigilante justice on bike thieves," says Goodyke.

Const. Tim Fanning readily admits that bike theft could receive a higher priority by police if the department got a truer picture of the rate of bicycle theft. People have to start reporting the crimes, he says, adding that the process for reporting crime has been streamlined, and waits are now minutes instead of a half-hour on the non-emergency line: 604-717-3321. If you witness a crime in progress, however, he stresses that you call 911.

While no one is immune from property crime, (Green recalls that even one of the VPD bike squad bicycles has gone missing), car owners have a reasonable expectation their vehicles will be where they left them after dinner and a movie. Bicycle owners in Vancouver can't be so assured.

Mina Nozar's story has one happy twist. Ed Luciano and the team at Mighty Riders heard about her loss and put together a loaner bike for Nozar's triathlon. It was ready at 7:30 p.m. the night before she left for Penticton. Riding a strange bicycle for the race was stressful and nerve-wracking, and Nozar had problems with the chain coming off. Though grateful for being able to compete and complete, Nozar can't banish the memory of her stolen ride.

"It doesn't matter whether it's used or old. If it's your bike and you're used to it and you use it to commute or train, you have a relationship," she says.

"It's more than just a piece of property."

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