A Communication Case Study

Understanding Bike Lane Opposition in Small Town Canada



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August 24th 2026

Presentation

A town in British Columbia, Canada started to build its very first protected bike lane…

- The story
- Relevant literature
- My research project

Penticton, British Columbia, Canada



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Penticton, British Columbia, Canada



- Population: 36,000+
- Agriculture
- Tourism
- Recreation

Penticton, British Columbia, Canada



- Expansion in 1950s/60s
- Heavy reliance on cars
- Minimal transit usage

Penticton, British Columbia, Canada



Love that car!

Penticton, British Columbia, Canada



- Conservative voting region
- Rural/urban divide
- Larger vehicles on the road
- Construction during pandemic

Climate Action Plan: Shift from the Car



- Wildfires
- Smoky skies
- Crop failures

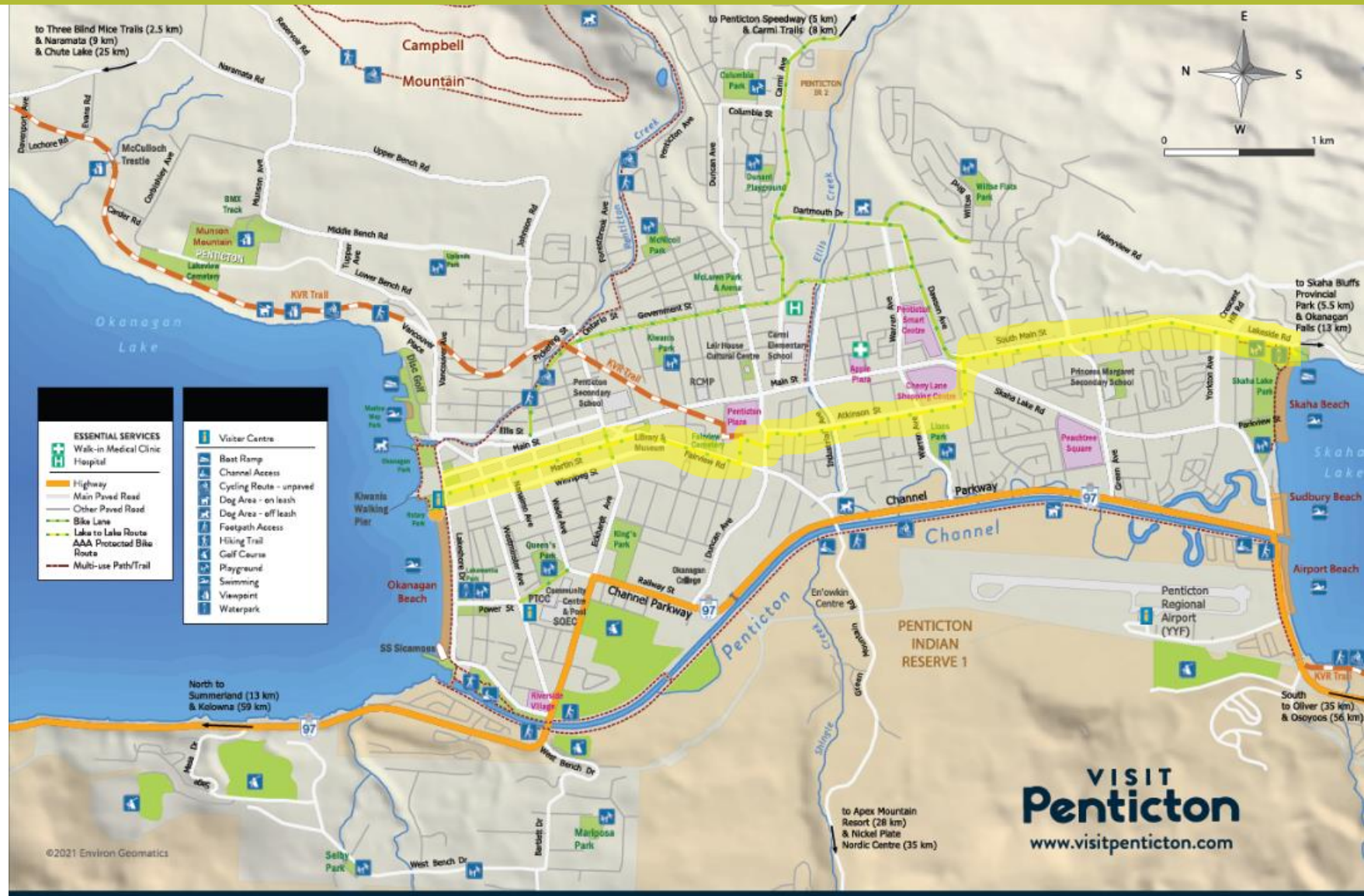
Penticton’s Lake-to-Lake Protected Bike Lane

2012

Planning start

2021

Construction start



A Hopeful Beginning...



Literature: Bike Lane Opposition

- Powerful ideas about car culture can lead to opposition [1,2,3,4,5]
- Car prioritization runs deep [6]
- Cycling infrastructure is an affront on the car [5]
- Opposition is most evident when design is redistributive [7,8]
- Car-centricity underlies many dominant narratives [9]
- Cycle traffic seen as cause of car externalities [4]
- Normalization of the car = denormalization of the bike [10]

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Year 2021: Conflict Heats Up

Talk of town
Social media + new forums
Letters to the editor
Petitions
Anti-lane group
Protests



Literature: Opposition Build Up

- Opposition often peaks shortly after implementation [11]
- Planners often taken by surprise [11]
- Not a business-as-usual infrastructure [12]
- Main opposition stakeholders: [11]
  - Retailers
  - Anti-gentrification activists
  - Marginalized cyclists
  - Conservative voters

Year 2022: Conflict Gets Political

“I was very clear that I would oppose new bike lanes should I be elected.”

She was elected.



Literature: Impacts on Political Will

- Bike lanes often become outsized political issues [7,13,14]
- Politicians reluctant to spend their social capital [15]
- Politicians rarely question car dominant thinking [10]
- Opposition can lessen over time[11], but political impacts long-lasting

Years 2023-2025: Discourse Disruptions

Due to opposition pressure, Penticton council voted to shut down discourse about bike lanes for the duration of their term in power.

Literature: Discourse Analysis

- Discourse analysis recommended in active transit planning [16]
- Bike lane responses are cultural, so understanding cultural context is key [16]
- Discourse shifts over time [17,18, 19]

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Years 2012- 2025: Plenty of Communication

- Dedicated website
  - FAQs
  - Videos
  - Surveys
  - Reports
  - User data
- Engagement sessions
- Media stories

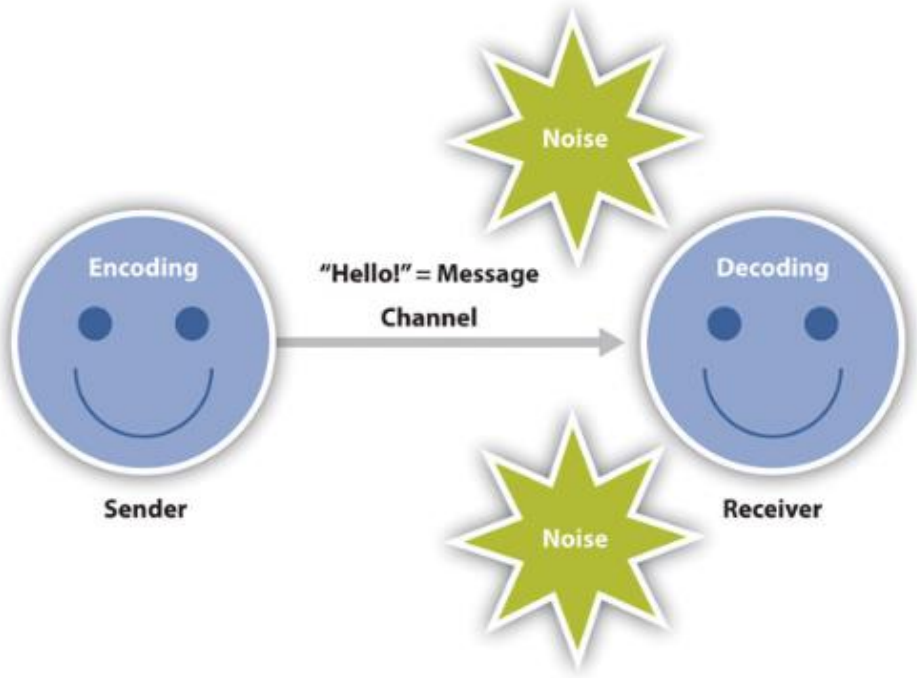


Literature: Communications

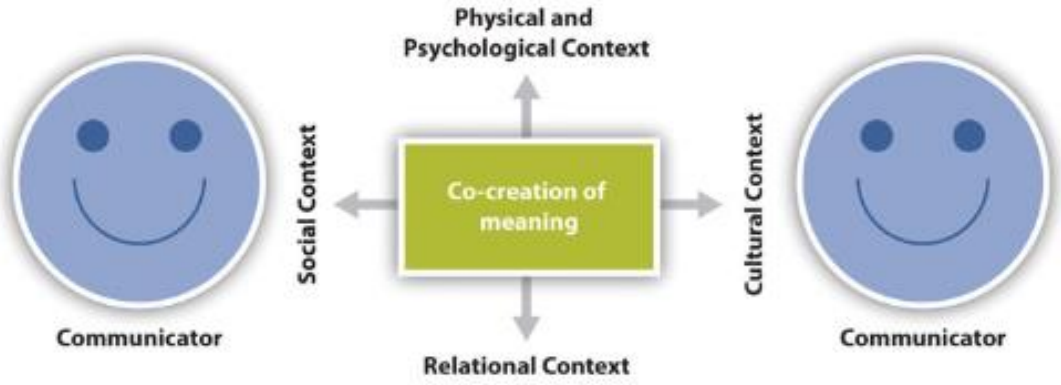
- Communicate to stakeholder values[11], foster dialogue[15]
- Understand the changing communications landscape [20, 21]
- Address shifting discourse norms [20, 21]
- Understand that the quality of debate is under attack [22]

Hym/imageBroker/Rex/Shutterstock, n.d.)

Conceptualizing Communication



Transmission



Transaction

Research Design

What oppositional discourse shaped Penticton's bike lane conflict?

- What issues were raised by citizen and political opponents over the course of the conflict?
- How was this opposition articulated over time?
- What assumptions, dominant narratives and sociocultural factors influenced that articulation of opposition over time?
- What can other communities learn from this case?

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Image Links

Slide 1 https://www.penticton.ca/city-services/transportation/transportation-master-plan

Slide 3 https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-of-Canada-provinces-and-territories-Image-credit-Esra-Ogunday_fig1_313272929

Slide 4 https://destinationlesstravel.com/things-to-do-in-penticton-bc/

Slide 5 https://reelontheriver.ca/my-american-cousin/

Slide 6 https://pentictonwesternnews.com/2026/06/04/hundreds-of-classic-cars-to-roll-into-penticton-for-special-summertime-show/

Slide 7 https://www.castanet.net/news/Kelowna/359812/More-protest-convoys-taking-place-in-Okanagan-on-Saturday

Slide 8 https://www.castanet.net/news/Summerland/627639/Hwy-97-could-be-closed-until-Saturday-due-to-the-Bald-Range-wildfire-near-Summerland

Slide 9 https://www.penticton.ca/sites/default/files/2025-05/2025%20Updated%20Cycling%20and%20Trail%20Map.pdf.

Slide 10 https://www.vernonmorningstar.com/news/over-200-cyclists-turn-out-to-try-pentictons-new-bike-lane-3333211

Slide 13 https://pentictonwesternnews.com/2023/05/20/around-75-people-protest-bike-lane-barriers-outside-penticton-city-hall/

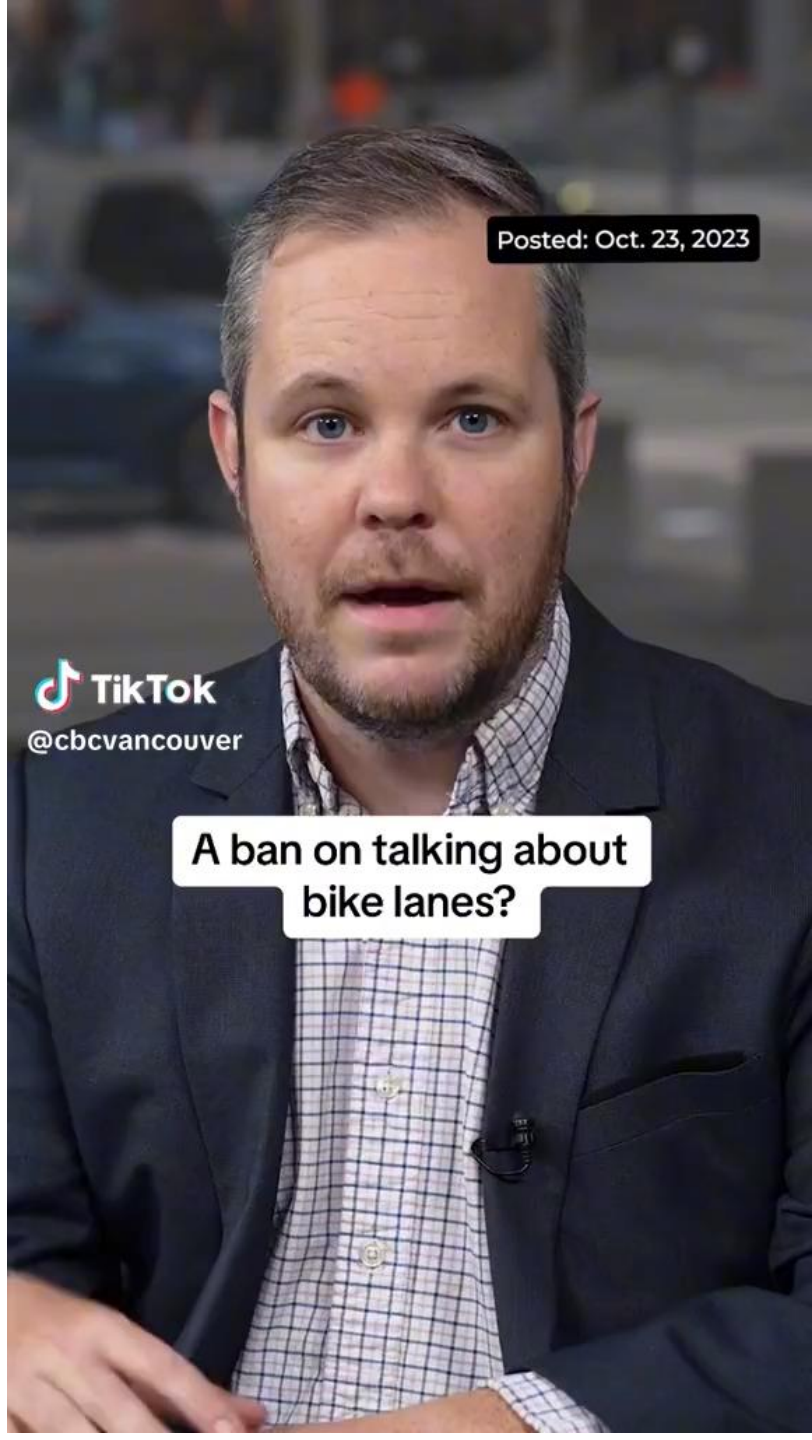
Slide 15 https://www.revelstokereview.com/news/no-new-bike-lanes-in-penticton-for-at-least-3-years-5934362

Slide 19 https://www.penticton.ca/city-services/roads-transportation/bike-route-construction

Slide 21 https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-esc-communicationforprofessionals/chapter/communication-process-overview/

Video:

Penticton's Bike Lane Controversy



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Thank you