

# Could St. Catharines be the next Ciclovía?

Posted By MATTHEW VAN DONGEN AND TIFFANY MAYER

Gil Penalosa knows the wonder a bike trail can work. As the former parks commissioner for Bogota,

Colombia, he's seen how networks of car-free lanes can lead a community down a new path.

"It's almost like an exercise in social integration. It's something fantastic," Penalosa said.

Here's why.

During his tenure, Penalosa revolutionized the South American capital, home to seven million people, by closing off 91 kilometres of roads to cars every Sunday. That turned the metropolis into a bikeable, walkable, Rollerbladeable community.

He called it Ciclovía. Not only are more than 1.5 million Colombians participating in car-free Sundays today, but the idea has spread to other cities, including Ottawa, Paris, France, and Guadalajara, Mexico.

"Here's one place where you see the rich and the poor, the old and the young, the fat and the skinny -- everybody -- doing different things," Penalosa said.

Penalosa, head of the Canadian non-profit organization Walk and Bike for Life, sees St. Catharines as being the next home to Ciclovía. But it needs to up its investment in walkable, bikeable communities first. It's an idea he plans to peddle March 29 as the keynote speaker at Eco-Fest at Club Roma.

The reasons are simple. We all know active transportation is good for the environment because it's virtually carbon-free. It's also good for the mental and physical health of people who live here, given all the good that exercise does.

Mostly, though, in a region struggling to reinvent itself and quell the brain drain it's endured with many of our young and educated leaving for greener pastures, walkable, bikeable communities are crucial, Penalosa said.

"In a globalized world, the best people, they can live anywhere in the world. So why would they live in St. Catharines and not somewhere else? You need a great St. Catharines or else the best people are going to leave," Penalosa said. "In the 21st century, quality of life is the most important tool of economic competitiveness. The only way to really get out of the economic crisis is with a quality of life to attract and retain the best people."

Sandwiched between Niagara Falls and Toronto in the Golden Horseshoe that's set to grow a few sizes in the next 23 years -- think four million more people -- St. Catharines needs to start mapping out an active transportation network now, Penalosa said.

"It's not that St. Catharines won't grow. We're not talking

What:Eco-Fest, featuring vendors with environmentally friendly wares, local food and green ideas.

When:Sunday, March 29, 10 a. m.-4 p. m.

Where:Club Roma

Cost:Free

about quantity, though. We're talking about quality," he said. "We want to think of how we want to live and build our cities accordingly."

While he will tout the merits of active transportation and the need to develop trails and paths on March 29, Penalosa's talk will segue into a brainstorming session for St. Cathariners to come up with ways to achieve the walkable, bikeable community they want. Groups will discuss what they can do in the short term: those low-risk, low-cost, high visibility feats. They will also come up with ideas of what they want two to five years from now.

Penalosa and Walk and Bike for Life will use that input to draft an action plan and present it to the city for what he hopes will be future reference.

"Unfortunately, many of the communities that are growing around the GTA aren't really (growing) very nicely. There's a lot of sprawl, there's a lack of walking places. It's planning around the car," he said. "Whatever we do, the cities we build in the next 20 years are going to be there for hundreds of years.

"Never again are we going to build so many communities for so many people in such a short period of time. This requires a sense of urgency."