

February 13, 2012

Other Voices article for the Milpitas Post

Dear Editor,

At the last City Council meeting, I returned to my e-bike and found a note: "Rob, Quit stealing from the City!! Robin". (Here I use my daughter's name to protect the judgmental.) That note caused me to think that others might view my use of City electricity as a theft. So, I offer the following explanation of my behavior.

My use of electric-powered bicycles stems from my belief that Climate Change caused by CO2 emissions is a big problem that is rapidly getting worse. In 2011, the nation suffered 14 weather disasters each causing \$1 billion or more in damage last year, a new record. The old record was nine. Riding an e-bike around town helps cut my personal carbon footprint, so I feel that I am making a personal contribution to a sustainable society. And, beside, riding an electric bike for errands is a lot more fun than driving.

The "stealing" in question is my use of City power to re-charge my batteries. Since long before the new City Hall was built, back when the old City Hall had an unlocked electrical outlet a few feet from the bicycle rack, I rode my e-bike there and plugged in. Cost to the City: one cent whenever I charge up. That one cent of electricity is good for about 2 miles on an e-bike, and my home is about 2 miles from City Hall. If our community agrees that the reduction of CO2 emissions is worth one cent to the public welfare, then we can call it fair exchange.

What if I drove instead? There are costs, both financial and environmental, to the City when I drive to the Council meetings in my 1990 mini-van. The financial costs include far more wear and tear on City streets (which break down at a rate of \$2M/year but are only repaired at a \$1M/year level) along with tire and brake residue which are environmental costs. There is also the public health costs of the toxic exhaust that is not mitigated by a warm catalytic converter. When cold, as it is the first miles, the converter does little or nothing to reduce pollution.

Then there is that parking place that my van will need. Surface parking spots go for about \$10,000 each, not counting maintenance. If we pretend that "my" parking spot will last for 100 years, my 2-hour "free parking" subsidy from the City would be two cents. The City is still getting a bargain when I e-bike and re-charge instead.

"Robin" may not know that nearly 60% of the oil consumed in the United States is imported from other countries. We are importing over \$300B (\$300,000,000,000) of oil per year. As a fiscal conservative, I think it is nuts – especially since multiple plans show that we can save a lot of money switching to renewables. As Al Gore put it, "We're borrowing money from China to buy oil from the Persian Gulf to burn it in ways that destroy the planet. Every bit of that's got to change."

As a patriot, I want to reduce our country's dependence on foreign regimes. As a citizen, I want to promote the general welfare and public health. As a responsible individual and member of my community, I am doing what I can to shift the culture away from today's "fuelish" ways toward sustainable ways – including riding an e-bike. And charging for "free" at City Hall.

Rob Means
Milpitas residents