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Vancouver's tricycle delivery system not child's play

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Start-up aims to replace trucks downtown with their carbon-neutral tricycles that already deliver office supplies and produce

Graham Anderson, a Simon Fraser University graduate, recently started a new job delivering office supplies around downtown Vancouver. But instead of loading the boxes of paper, ink cartridges and pens into a truck, he places everything inside a box attached to the back of a tricycle equipped with an electric-assisted motor.

Then he pedals down the bike lanes on Dunsmuir Viaduct and rides into the West End, making 40 to 50 drop-offs at offices along the way and back before he hands the trike to someone on the afternoon shift.

The cargo tricycle delivery service was started by Mr. Anderson and several other SFU graduates, who came up with the idea when they took a sustainable community development class in school. Called Shift Urban Cargo Delivery, the co-operative aims to replace delivery trucks downtown with their carbon-neutral tricycles. Each trike weighs about 45 to 90 kilograms and can carry up to 270 kilograms of goods, ranging from office supplies to furniture.

"We're allowed to park up on the sidewalk, in parking spots, in loading zones, basically right up to the front of the building," Mr. Anderson said. "But with a truck driver, typically, he would be finding a parking spot and loading zone, and then walking a two- or three-block radius around there, so we gain a bit of speed and efficiency."

The business was officially launched last Thursday, and trikers have been delivering goods for Mill's Basics, an office supplies company. So far, the human-powered tricycle has proven to be just as efficient as one of Mills Basics' trucks.

"I think the first day we had about 63 deliveries delivered," said Brad Mills, the company's CEO. "It's early days but it looks like we could reduce a truck."

The trikes have experienced some minor wiring glitches, and peddling around with 140 to 180 kilograms of cargo can be tiring, but the biggest challenge, Mr. Anderson joked, has been all the people who smile at him and ask questions.

"People want to stop and chat with us and find out what we're doing, and they really want to learn about the trikes and the system behind this while we're trying to run deliveries," he said. "That's been a bit of a fun challenge, in wanting to really compete with the trucks while having people being excited about what we're doing and taking time to appreciate that."

OnePlanet Catering, a company that sources organic, local produce, has also hired Shift. The catering company has always had most of its food delivered by bicycles, but an electrically powered tricycle with a larger carrying capacity can act as a long-haul courier, OnePlanet co-owner Garry Steel said.

"We started talking to [Shift] and it seemed like a good marriage," he said. "We've always been organic and sustainable, but this was another move in that direction of zero emission, and it has gotten massive feedback and our clients are very excited about it."

Rules for the road

Vancouver does not have any set bylaws or regulations specifically for the kind of tricycles that are being used by Shift Urban Cargo - with electric motors. The company's members offer some insight on what you need to know about making deliveries by cargo trikes.

Rider's qualifications

A Class 5 driver's licence

Safety requirements

A helmet

Other requirements

Riders must carry a copy of the company's business licence at all times and the company's name must be displayed on the sides and rear of the tricycle

Training

Shift recommends members take the Streetwise Cycling Course, offered by the Vancouver Area Cycling Coalition. The course teaches cyclists how to communicate with other road users, where the safest riding spots are, and how to ride in the rain

Where you can ride

On the roads and on separated bike lanes

Where you load/unload

Any commercial loading zones or lanes

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