

Cycle Safety

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Photo by Amanda Leung

Traveling by bicycle is good for the health of the planet, reducing the carbon emissions that contribute to global warming. And it used to be said that cycling – great cardiovascular exercise – was good for one’s own health as well.

But with the rash of injuries and deaths resulting from cars hitting bicyclists in the Bay Area over the past few years, the danger of bike travel has increased. The rise in multitasking while driving – fiddling with iPods and cellphones and myriad other devices – as well as drivers’ drug and alcohol use, has literally collided with the rise in the numbers of cyclists to produce deadly accidents. A doctor friend recently told me that now, when he recommends exercise to patients, he does not include bicycling because it is too dangerous. From a medical standpoint, he believes the risk of serious injury outweighs the cardiovascular benefit of cycling.

On Sand Hill Road in Menlo Park, Page Mill Road in Palo Alto and other semi-rural thoroughfares around the Bay Area, flocks of cyclists speed along like brightly colored birds in their Day-Glo Lycra. Just in the past few years, on these roads favored by cyclists, automobiles drifting over into bike lanes have killed a 20-year-old woman from Smith College interning at the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center, killed biomedical engineer John Peckham, killed popular fourth-grade teacher Michelle Mazzei, and severely injured MaryAnn Levenson, a Menlo Park dietician and mother of three. Other Bay Area roads have had their share of accidents, too.

California State Assemblymember Pedro Nava represents Santa Barbara, another region where cycling is popular and where several cyclists have recently been killed by drivers. He introduced a bill in the state legislature last year, modeled on a similar law in Oregon, to require cars to pass a minimum of three feet away from cyclists using the right-hand shoulder of the road. Called the “bicycle buffer bill,” after intensive debate, the Assembly Transportation Committee failed to report out AB 1941. Nava reintroduced the bill at the end of 2006.

A good first step, which put the issue on the public agenda, Nava’s concept is a modest effort toward addressing a problem that may require more dramatic solutions. A three-foot margin will not help if a driver is distracted or incapacitated by alcohol or drugs. Cyclists need to be afforded more absolute forms of protection than pavement stripes defining bike lanes on roadways, and even laws about keeping space between bikes and cars.

The three key words in this arena are *barriers*, *sidepaths* and *bikeways*. Where bike lanes are on roadways, they should be separated from car traffic by barriers that could range from low berms that would be difficult for cars to run over, to plastic or concrete walls that completely separate bike traffic from autos. We already have such barriers protecting both cyclists and pedestrians on bridges in the Bay Area – notice them next time you cross the Golden Gate Bridge – and they could be added elsewhere. A 2001 study by the Mineta Transportation Institute in San José even concluded that cyclists could safely use freeways if such barriers were constructed.

Ideally, cyclists should have their own roadways, either sidepaths along major roads that are separated from the roadway or bike paths that follow bike-commute routes directly without reference to the roads used by cars. In Holland and Denmark, where bikes are a common form of transport, sidepaths line many roads and highways. In Washington, D.C., a well-used bicycle sidepath parallels the George Washington Parkway along the Potomac through town and south to George Washington’s home at Mt. Vernon.

Bikeways can often be created in the right-of-ways for railroads that no longer exist. The national “rails-to-trails” movement pursues this concept, but unfortunately, funds available to convert the rail beds to bike paths have been limited. And by the way, sidepaths and bikeways could be used not only by cyclists, but by walkers, Segway Transporter riders, three-wheeled bicycle aficionados and others who use environmentally friendly modes of transportation.

Of course, the issue with all these ideas is that they cost money. But if we’re serious about preventing global warming, we have to put our resources where they will accomplish that goal. Industry is producing all kinds of cool new personal-transit technology. Individuals are increasingly willing to use these non-polluting transportation forms. And they should be supported by the expenditure of public funds to construct bike paths so they can safely make this contribution to the public good. The side benefits for reducing traffic congestion in the Bay Area and improving public health are obvious.

The Bay Area receives considerable federal and state transportation funding. The allocations for bicycling and other non-automobile types of personal transit are miniscule. That needs to change. Ω