

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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More People Getting Around on Bikes

When you look at who rides bikes, the majority of biking in this country is still for recreation, whether it's just out with your family on some easy trail, some paved path or it's a road rider out for exercise. But where we're seeing the big growth is around what we call "everyday riding:" this idea of a bike as a way to just get around town. We see some people commuting long distance, but what we're really seeing a lot of is increase in use of bikes for short trips. Whether it's to go to work or to the grocery store, or to the farmer's market, there's just a lot more interest in that. There's a demographic shift going on; there's also this shift of people wanting more options. They're not against driving cars. The vast majority of people still drive, but increasingly people want other ways to get around.

A Major Shift in Transportation

You never really know if you're at a tipping point until afterwards. It's a hindsight thing. But when you look at a lot of these shifts that we're seeing of young people waiting longer to get their driver's licenses, and being more interested in living in a quote "Urban Environment." They're less interested in driving long distances to work at a suburban campus. They're more interested in living closer to where they work. I think part of it is attitudinal, that just this romance of the car I think is dimming, that I don't think young people today are growing up with the cool guy down the street fixing his car on the weekend and everybody gathers 'round and that's like the social hub. Cars have become much more complicated for one. That's small but I think that's a piece of this shift away from the identity of, "When I grow up I'm going to have a really fancy car." I think there's less of that. I think the other reality is economic: that a lot of our young kids just don't have as much money anymore. There are not as many high-paying jobs for them to slot into right out of college or right out of high school. And then you look at priorities and they balance, "Do I want to have my smartphone and connect to the world that way, or do I want to be making car payments for the next six or seven years?" So I think there's absolutely an economic piece to that as well as an attitudinal piece.

Bike Infrastructure Is an Easy Investment

All transportation infrastructure is expensive, right? People on the outside are just aghast when the millions of dollars enter the conversation. But when you look at most of the projects that are underway to create space for bikes, they are really cheap compared to other transportation-related investments—whether it's adding a lane to a highway in an urban area, or putting in light rail, or even building new sidewalks. A lot of these bike projects that we're seeing, especially in our part of the world—this idea of protected bike lanes—most of them are retrofit. So it's curb to curb; it's just reorienting

space. It's repurposing space. In some cases where we have really wide travel lanes you can create different structure, bring different order to the street and it's not really that expensive. In talking to cities these protected bike lanes that they're building—where it's some kind of physical separation between moving traffic and people on bikes, so they're not on the sidewalk with the pedestrians and they're not out in the travel lanes with the cars—most of those are being separated by planters or bollards, plastic posts, in some cases bits of curb. And what we're seeing in terms of cost is maybe it's like \$200-400 thousand a mile for those fairly simple installations, which someone estimated that a new mile of fairly simple interstate was \$60 million. So we're at a whole different order of magnitude smaller in terms of costs.

Who Fights Against Bikes?

For a while the fight was really on the traffic engineering level. We had a whole generation of engineers that grew up thinking that—or were trained to believe that—moving cars as quickly as possible was the highest use. That was their problem to be solved, and engineers are great problem solvers. But we have seen that shift pretty dramatically with new designs coming out of the group NACTO, coming out of federal highways. We're seeing a big shift in the transportation engineering world that they are not the barrier that they once were. If the problem is reframed as not just moving as many cars as quickly as possible, it's as moving people, a lot of them pretty joyfully figure out the engineering challenges. I would say the big problems now are kind of very high level in the transportation world that they still just don't see bikes as real transportation. And then at a very local level there is a lot of support broadly for the idea of bikes. But then it comes down to, “All right, we're going to put better bike lanes on this corridor.” Then it becomes very intense, because you're talking about fairly traditional turf wars. In some cases it is a zero sum game that you're going to remove some parking, you're going to remove a travel lane, and that gets ferociously intense. We hear a lot of people say, “I'm not against bikes. I love bikes, just don't put it on this street. Put it somewhere else.” I think it's that we have ceded the vast majority of our public space to cars—either the movement or the storage of cars—and it's hard to shift that. It's hard for people to give that up when they're accustomed to it. Even if you can make all of the right arguments, there's a very visceral ownership about that, and a fear of “Oh you're going to make congestion worse, or my local business is going to suffer because the only way that people are getting to my business is parking in that parking space right in front of my store.” Part of that is a perception that the people who come in cars are somehow more valuable than the other shoppers. And part of it is a reality that if you say, “We're going to reduce access to your struggling local business,” that business owner is going to complain about that. So it's a very local thing.

Changing Perceptions of Cycling Safety

You can encourage a person to get out on a bike—offer them free muffins and bananas one day—but if it's not a comfortable experience they won't do it again. But what's happening is there's this realization that if you provide people with safe and comfortable places to ride by creating protected bike lanes on big, busy streets, by connecting them to completely separated pathways and side streets where the volume and speed of traffic is low, that people will ride. So they're not crazy to not be out there on the streets

today. The good news is that there's rapid progress. In transportation terms there's pretty rapid progress toward retrofitting streets to provide those spaces where people feel safe, and they are safe. These designs are still fairly new, so the safety data accrues over time, but all of the indicators are that these separated lanes, especially if they are thoughtfully designed, are really far safer than being out in the road mixing it up with traffic.

PeopleForBikes: Getting More People on Bikes More Often

PeopleForBikes is a national non-profit. We are based in Boulder, Colorado. We were originally formed by the bike industry— leaders of the major bike companies—to help get more people on bikes more often. So we work on a variety of levels. My work in particular is on helping cities build better infrastructure for bikes: better places to ride, understanding that better places to ride is a key piece of making it safe and comfortable and attractive for more people to get out on bikes.

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