

Whither Portland: thoughts from an urban bicycle commuter (Jan)

I'm impressed by the depth and variety of comments by groupies responding to Dave's call for submissions on Portland's future.

I can't improve on the ideas and opinions presented by the rest of you. I agree with an awfully lot of them.

I think the articulately expressed viewpoints really should be expanded, polished and published in an anthology. The first book produced by our book group.

For my contribution, I'll muse on a topic that isn't and probably doesn't deserve to be among the Top Ten: how and why Portland should become a better city for bicycling.

I was in my mid-20s when I became enamored of urban bicycling. I vacationed on a little island off Maine, rented a bike for a day, and fell in love (with bicycling; I was traveling solo).

I came back to my 6th floor apartment in DC's Adams Morgan neighborhood, bought a used Raleigh 3-speed for \$25, and started bicycle commuting. Not every day, but a lot of them. I flew down the hill to work and huffed back up (molepiles compared to the hills Mary pedals efficiently now; I never got that good). It was fun, and good exercise.

I learned to be more respectful of cars after one clipped me in a classic right-hook (bike on right going straight, car turning right swipes bike). I learned to watch out for railroad tracks and slippery wooden planks covering subway construction. All good lessons for an urban cyclist.

I moved to Portland and brought my bike. A year later (1977; I was 31) I got hired as the third-ever bicycle and pedestrian program coordinator for the City of Portland. This lasted 7 years.

Portland had a bicycle program because state law required it. The 1971 Bicycle Bill requires cities to spend at least 1% of their state highway money on bikeways and walkways.

I bought a house in Northeast Portland that gave me a 4-mile pedal commute. (Did you know you can type in any two addresses in Portland and maybe beyond, select "bike" as your mode of transport, and get a route and mileage?) My Raleigh 3-speed was stolen downtown because I didn't think I needed to lock it to something immovable. I bought a Raleigh 10-speed, super lightweight. It was stolen in one of my 5 house burglaries. In 1980 I got a fine Trek road bike that I still have and cherish today.

If you're inexperienced in urban cycling, it's important to start slowly and study up on how to coexist with cars. One day I hope you'll be able to go most places within traditional city neighborhoods on paths separated from cars. Until then, you need to gain confidence riding next to automobiles.

In my time working on bikes in the early 80s, when there were barely any bike-only routes (including 0 bike lanes), we produced a practical map that color-coded every Portland street according to "suitability" for bikes. On the back of that map were cartoons depicting the basics of sharing the road safely.

Many of us had no problem bicycling around Portland following the guidance of that map. We stayed off high-traffic roads but also avoided slow-going neighborhood streets where you need to pause to look for cross traffic at every intersection.

We signaled our turns, honored stop signs (most of the time; with the extra visibility you have on a bike, you often can see whether there's traffic on the cross street), wore helmets, and "took the lane" if we were going the same speed as cars (most cyclists travel around 12-15 mph; traffic lights downtown were timed for 13 mph).

To cope with winter and dark, we got really good raingear and very bright lights. We got bike parking requirements added to the zoning code.

It took actual bike paths and lanes to bump up Portland bike commuting from around 1 percent in 1980 to a high of 7 percent (of commute trips) a couple years ago. While the number of cyclists and bike trips is holding steady or slightly growing, the number of auto trips is growing much faster; hence bikes now are a lower percentage (around 6%) of all commute trips.

It took political leaders to goad the Portland transportation people to make those paths and bike lanes. We got Neil G. to lead a bike-to-work ride....the very day he helicoptered out of City Hall to become US DOT secretary. Connie was a place-holder. Ivancie hated bikes, and a lot of other things. Bud rode bikes, paddled canoes standing up and led in a lot of other ways, but he didn't press for bike routes. Starting in the early 90s, Earl did. What a difference he and Vera made.

Those very same engineers in PBOT that had quietly blocked bicycling progress for more than a decade got bicycling religion under Earl. For the first time, cars lost some real estate to bike lanes. Clever solutions were devised for sticky problems, like bike-specific signals and green "bikes belong here" zones. Portland became officially "weird," and bikes were the mode of choice for young (and not-so-young) wierdos....World Naked Bike Ride and all of that.

By 2005 car traffic had gotten so bad that the only way to stay sane, if you worked anywhere close in, was to hop on a bike for your daily commute. Numbers of cyclists shot up.

Fast-forward to today. We have a housing shortage and lots of in-migration. Thousands of new rental units are under construction all over town. The newcomers who rent them will have good jobs and cars. But they won't be able to get anywhere in their cars during the ever-expanding crush hours. They will be young and strong and they will want to ride bikes. (Or transit, if 1) they live near MAX or 2) buses are given priority over cars so they're not stuck in gridlock.)

The city will be well advised to accommodate its growing density by making bicycling easier and safer for everyone....by, increasingly, giving cyclists their own routes through town, equal in convenience to but safely separated from motor traffic.