

Take to your bike

By Neal Peirce
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Are we ready to go bicycling? Could these times of climate change, gas price inflation and bulging waistlines be prepping us for new waves of weekend biking adventures? Maybe even to leave cars parked and cycle to work daily? Louisville Mayor Jerry Abramson is one of a growing coterie of city leaders who believe the moment is ripe. Keynoting this year's National Bike Summit in Washington, Abramson described how an early 2005 Louisville gathering of cycling enthusiasts has changed his city's goals and focus.

Louisville's existing bike paths are being connected into a citywide system. Miles of highway bike lanes are being added. The city has adopted a "complete streets" policy requiring the placement of sidewalks, bike lanes and bus stop locations in any major road improvement. And the city is planning two commuter-friendly bike stations, similar to the major installation with indoor bike parking, rentals and repair facilities that Chicago's Mayor Richard Daley installed in his city's new lakefront Millennium Park.

Revived bicycling is easier to proclaim than achieve in an America that's experienced a half century-plus of freeway construction, hype about fast cars, and the multibillions in advertising dollars the industry continuously pours into auto glorification.

But the new bike campaign isn't against cars per se - It just asks autos and trucks to yield a share of the road to a transportation means that occupies a fraction as much pavement, doesn't pollute, combats obesity, builds overall physical fitness, and can help congestion by taking a share of autos off the highways.

Of course, any city can anticipate some angry motorist reactions if new bike lanes cut back on lanes for regular traffic. Competition for limited roadway space can be furious.

That's one reason bicycle advocates such as Brooklyn-based community organizer Aaron Naparstek, a leader of New York's "livable streets" movement, are broadcasting a countervailing new message.

"Private passenger cars and SUVs," insists Naparstek, "are not the most efficient way to move people through a limited, precious commodity - our street space. Bikes and public transit are." The reformers' prize example is

Copenhagen, which has focused on new bikeways since the 1930s and now has more than 250 miles of them.

Over a third - 36 percent - of Copenhagen workers commute by bike, 32 percent by mass transit, and only 27 percent by automobile.

And that, adds Naparstek, "in a place where it's cold and rainy half the year." Copenhagen goes all-out to promote the cycling: there's one parking lot for suburban commuters, for example, in which a bike is part of the deal - pay your parking fee and automatically get a bike to pedal into town.

Paris may be the next cause for celebration - Mayor Bertrand Delanoë has announced a program to scatter 1,450 high-tech bicycle stations across the city, 20,600 bikes by this summer. The plan, based on a successful program in Lyons, is designed not just to reduce congestion but, in the words of a Delanoë aide, "change Paris' image - make it quieter, less polluted, a nicer atmosphere, a better way of life." In an interesting twist, Paris is also promoting bikes as the swiftest way to get around town - faster than cars, taxis and walking.

Personally, I've found that true in Washington for years - at least anywhere close in the center city, my bike's the fastest form of transportation. I couldn't agree more with Rep. Earl Blumenauer, D-Ore., founder of the Congressional Bike Caucus, who said last week of his experience riding his weathered Trek bicycle around Washington: "I have saved hundreds of hours of time. I have burned thousands and thousands of calories instead of gallons of petroleum and, after 10 years, have probably saved \$50,000." But there's a big psychic side to biking too. Louisville's Abramson describes it as "the intimate connection you feel to neighborhoods and neighbors as you bike through a community. You don't just smell the roses and the forsythia, you smell the barbecue, see vegetable and flower gardens, hear music. You make eye contact with folks on front porches." All that, plus aging baby boomers favoring bikes over jogging as their knees and hips give out, may explain the active bike programs now being pushed from Seattle to Gainesville, Fla., Davis, Calif., to Chattanooga, Tenn. The League of American Bicyclists lists many, with ratings from bronze to platinum, at www.bikeleague.org.

Rising bike use will also help with bike safety - a major issue everywhere. Cyclists, even when tempted, need to stop all daredevil maneuvers. And motorists have to get accustomed to watching for bikes and then sharing the road with them. Designated bike lanes and signage help. Experience in such cities as Copenhagen and Portland, Ore., shows safety for bike riders actually rises as there are more and more riders and the auto world learns to share the roadways with them.

Neal Peirce's e-mail address is nrp@citistates.com.

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