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Bicyclists are changing our streets and cities



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A backstage hero of Jeff Mapes' book "Pedaling Revolution: How Cyclists are Changing American Cities" is an intense young bureaucrat named Mia Birk, who put Portland on a "road diet" and created bike lanes across the Rose City.

"The motto was, 'Better to ask forgiveness than permission,'" joked Mapes.

It sums up why a sweeping change in transportation policy has caught hold from New York City to Louisville, Ky., to such "Left Coast" cities as Seattle, Portland and Davis, Calif.

In Portland, where he is a political writer with The Oregonian, Mapes' bike commutes were made safer when the city shut down one entrance ramp to the Hawthorne Bridge that was causing bike-car conflicts.

"A movement has grown slowly, under the radar screen, which people are hardly aware is going on," Mapes told a Tuesday night forum sponsored by the Cascade Bicycle Club.

Seattle is a big blip on bicyclists' radar screen. The city's big street repair package, approved by voters a couple years back, provided \$27 million for bicycle projects.

At a weekly Madrona neighborhood breakfast, Seattle City Council President Richard Conlin often shows up in riding attire, taking his helmet off as he orders coffee. About 4.2 percent of trips taken in the Emerald City are by bike, triple the figure of a few years back.

Portland is doing a bit better.

With a bit of the smug, we're-social-pioneers attitude often heard out of Oregon -- on fronts ranging from recycled bottles to land use planning to physician-assisted suicide -- Mapes is a cheerleader for the "revolution."

"I've seen in Portland how just an approximate 5 percent share for biking -- more than five times the national average -- has changed the city," writes Mapes. "And I see how learning to ride my bike in the city has changed my life. I still have a car and I still appreciate its utility. But I don't worry about high gas prices, road congestion or lack of parking downtown."

Of course, Oregon is also up-front in undesirable ways. The state's unemployment rate is up to 12.1 percent, three points higher than Washington's -- and even higher than Michigan.

Mapes takes us to even more pedal-friendly cities. In Amsterdam, 40 percent of non-walking trips are by bike. He quotes, approvingly, Jack Wolters, the city's top traffic-safety officer: "The target of the police is not to control cyclists and pedestrians. It is to control the most dangerous part, motorcar drivers."

Such attitudes can make motorists skin crawl on this side of the Atlantic Ocean. "Some people don't like bikes on the road," Mapes said Tuesday. "Transition is hard."

And a faction of bicyclists demonstrate public belligerence. Seattle, and other cities, experience "Critical Mass" protests in which swarms of bikers set out to hold up Friday rush hour traffic.

Pedaling Revolution quotes John Forester, a pioneer-turned-critic of the bicycling movement. He pegs an attitude: "The anti-motorists I have dealt with in my life, they are religious frankly about anti-motoring, and they will do anything to carry on their cause. Nasty people."

Some cities are more graceful, providing for non-motorized travel, than others. In Seattle, our Department of Transportation does a variation on Jack Wolters' formula.

It has made provision for bikers, but disrupts (and often endangers) motorists by ripping up streets with badly marked construction projects . . . and inconveniences pedestrians by blocking off sidewalks. Seattle seems to be adjusting to the increased presence of bicyclists on its streets, as are other cities.

Mapes cites a marvelous example, which I've lately seen exiting the University of Washington down toward University Village. The road crosses the popular Burke-Gilman Trail. A majority of motorists slow, almost to a complete stop, watching for bikes.

"Pedaling Revolution" makes a telling point about bicyclists' gains. The most effective revolutionaries have not been public zealots, but low-profile planners and congressional aides.

Former President Bush, an avid mountain biker, gets accolades. Despite right-wing grumbles, W. signed a transportation bill that contained a \$100 million model program, providing \$25 million apiece for four communities to see if they could increase the percentage of trips taken by bicycle.

Asked by Bicycling magazine if his riding enthusiasm was a factor in approving the bill, Bush replied: "Absolutely. The more accessible (streets and paths) are for bikes, the more likely it is that people will use them. But it's got to start at the local level."

Mapes is hoping, too, that more children will return to the pedaling habits of past generations.

"What we've forgotten is what a robust kids' bicycle culture we had in the 1950's, 1960's and into the 1970's," he said Tuesday.

The author's emphatic conclusion: The bicycle is playing a big role in making our cities more livable.

"It provides a vehicle that enhances the city's streetscapes instead of degrading them," he writes. "Houses sell for less if they're on arterials, but they hold their value just fine on bike boulevards. And bikes can be a lovely way to experience the city."

Spoken like a man whose stresses ease away as he pedals along the Willamette River.

An end note: Here's hats off to the Oregon State University Press for publishing one more lucid, consistently interesting book about Northwest life.

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