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# First Critical Mass ride since clash is Friday

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A month after an episode that resulted in the arrest of two bicyclists, Seattle riders look prepared to use Friday's Critical Mass rally as a statement that the monthly event isn't going away.

As always, Internet message boards are buzzing about the ad hoc ride, which begins on the last Friday of each month at Westlake Center and meanders throughout the city.

The main question participants seem to have this time: Could violence break out again?

Not if police have their way, said spokesman Jeff Kappel, who explained that in the past, officers have taken a mostly hands-off approach to the ride.

"This time there's going to be a larger police presence than normal," Kappel said, declining to go into more detail.

Earlier this month, city officials and cyclists held a meeting to try to ensure that rides are trouble-free and to calm hard feelings.

By its very nature, however, Critical Mass rides are unpredictable. Though the monthly ride can attract hundreds of participants, it has no formal leadership, no real mechanism to punish troublemakers and no predefined route.

Even cycling advocates now have serious questions about the purpose and effects of the events, which were started years ago as a way to assert riders' rights on the road. Such events take place in cities around the country.

Those questions were highlighted last month when police arrested two riders after a car was smashed up and its driver attacked.

Prosecutors are investigating the clash and have not decided whether to file charges, said Dan Donohoe, a spokesman at the King County Prosecutor's Office.

In 2006, two riders were arrested after they tangled with motorists who turned out to be King County sheriff's deputies.

Many bicyclists, however, say they view the ride as a benign mass protest or a way to commune with fellow riders.

"Really, it's just good fun. In my experience it hasn't been violent like the last time was," said Sera Day, who has participated twice in Critical Mass rides. She's out of town this week, though, and won't be riding Friday.

Said Deven Wilson: "For me, it's just community more than anything. It's fantastic to be a part of big group rides."

Wilson's experience reflects that of many Critical Mass riders. He showed up for the first time last month and just went with the crowd.

He has since become so passionate about Critical Mass rides that he took ownership of the movement's unofficial Seattle Web site.

Other bicyclist advocates, such the Cascade Bicycle Club, have said that Critical Mass may have run its course as a means of protest.

But because there's no formal statement of what Seattle's Critical Mass group stands for and every participant has his or her own reason for riding, its true purpose remains amorphous, said David Hiller, advocacy director for the bicycle club.

"Has it outlived its usefulness? Critical Mass at its inception was about shining the light on a disparity between the allocation of resources. What the protest is about now is the real question," Hiller said.

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