

**FEATURE: BICYCLES**

**PEDAL PUSHERS**

**Fair- and foul-weather cities alike are gearing up to make it safer and easier for commuters to bicycle to work.**

By Zach Patton

Chicago can be stiflingly hot during the summer and rain-chilled in the spring, and its wind-whipped winters are the stuff of legend. So when the subject is "bicycle commuting," Chicago is not the first city that springs to mind. But it's becoming a hot bike-to-work town. In the next decade, it plans to expand its network of bike trails to 500 miles, and has set a goal of putting a bike path of some sort within half a mile of every city resident.

Chicago is not the only place that is doing things like that. In fact, it's part of what's turning into a national movement. The motivation varies: Some cities see bike-friendliness as part of an economic development strategy, while others mainly want to fight traffic congestion. But the tactics are similar, from Los Angeles to Louisville, Phoenix to Minneapolis. Cities are adding bike lanes, building shower and storage facilities and spelling out pro-bicycling policies in resolutions and ordinances.

Given that a very small percentage of Americans rely on bicycles to commute to work--0.4 percent, or half a million people, according to the most recent Census data--the fuss over bicycle commuting may appear to be misplaced. But the Census numbers don't tell the whole story. They include only commuters who bike to work all the time. If bikers take the bus every other day or bike to a subway stop, they're not included in the count.

When you look at the trend lines--as opposed to just absolute numbers--you get a different picture. In Portland, Oregon, the number of cyclists has nearly quadrupled in the past 10 years. In San Francisco, bicycle commuting shot up 100 percent during the 1990s. Transportation officials in just about every big city are convinced that the momentum is building even faster now. There's no shortage of explanations. "Over the past five years, we've heard a lot about health concerns and the obesity epidemic," says Andy Clarke, executive director of the League of American Bicyclists, a century-old advocacy group. "And then in the past year, higher gas prices have started to contribute, too."

All those developments have influenced decisions by individual commuters. Local governments have encouraged them for a variety of reasons. They see bike-friendliness as a way to bring downtowns and inner-city neighborhoods to life, and attract the "creative class" newcomers that nearly every city covets these days. In building the livable city that the creative class is thought to want, Clarke says, "bicycling and walking have got to be at the core."

Most bike promotion programs don't seem to have much trouble attracting money. In general, cities have been able to rely on corporate funding and federal transportation subsidies to build their systems. Chicago's new \$3 million downtown bike station was paid for with federal funds and is now privately run. The transportation bill approved by Congress last year included about \$4.5 billion for pedestrian and cycling projects--a 35 percent jump from previous spending levels. In many cases, bicycling improvement projects, particularly those that spruce up neighborhoods or provide safe routes to schools, qualify for Community Development Block Grants.

**GETTING IN GEAR**

American cities have gone in for bike-friendly fads in the past. Often they have fizzled out: Grand plans for miles of bike paths have fallen apart, and policies for protecting bicyclists and making more room for them on city streets have been imposed and then scrapped only a few years later. But recent efforts may have more staying power.

It certainly seems to be more than a fad in Chicago. One hundred miles of dedicated bike lanes circle the city, capped off by the popular 20-mile Lakefront Path that runs almost the entire length of the city's Lake Michigan shoreline. The new bike station downtown in Millennium Park, a multi-level, 12,000-square-foot facility, houses lockers, showers and a repair shop, plus 24-hour bike storage. Membership at the station costs \$99 per year, but anyone can park bikes there for free. Last year, the city's Parks Department established a "bike ambassadors" program. Its mission is to organize teams of teenage volunteers to educate commuters about bicycle safety.

Then, this summer, Chicago released its master bicycling plan, which it calls Bike 2015. The culmination of three years of study, the plan commits the city to a goal, less than a decade from now, of having 5 percent of all trips covering less than 5 miles made by bicycle. It pledges to cut the number of bike injuries in half. Thousands of new short- and long-term bike storage facilities are planned for locations all over the city. Many schools and transit stations would have dedicated bike lanes leading straight to the front door. "It's definitely a very ambitious plan," acknowledges Ben Gomberg, head of the city's bicycle program. But he insists it can be done.

One reason it might happen is that it has the powerful support of the city's longtime mayor, Richard M. Daley, a biker himself. Chicago is a city where the mayor usually gets what he wants, and bicycles, along with health and environmental improvements, have been a near-obsession for Daley over the past several years.

## DIFFERENT STROKES

Chicago will have to go quite a distance to catch up with Portland, which has long prided itself on being the nation's most bike-friendly town, and has been awarded that distinction more than once by Bicycling Magazine. Portland already has 160 miles of bike lanes along its streets, another 70 miles in off-street bike paths, including a path to the airport, and 30 miles of what it calls "bike boulevards"-- streets where auto traffic is limited and the layout is designed specifically to make bicycle travel convenient. There are bike-parking facilities throughout the city. All of these moves have had a direct impact on the numbers: Daily counts of commuting cyclists have gone from around 3,500 in the mid-1990s to more than 12,000 today.

Given its image as a tree-hugging coastal town, Portland might be expected to emphasize bicycle travel. So might Boulder, Colorado, where 95 percent of the city's roads have a bike lane. But similar things are happening in less likely places. Phoenix actually has 500 miles of dedicated bikeways--more even than Portland, albeit spread across a much bigger territory. Austin, Texas, is in the middle of a major bike-lane expansion project. New York City, the national capital of subway-and-foot urbanism, recently announced a plan to increase bike lanes by 200 miles over the next three years. Seattle and Denver have new downtown storage stations. Cities in every region of the country now allow travelers to bring their bikes onto public transportation.

Lexington, Kentucky, hired a cycling chief three years ago expressly to balance out planning in a town built around cars. "We spent 50 years designing for the automobile," says Lexington cycling coordinator Kenzie Gleason. "But we're incorporating bike and pedestrian planning into every project we do now."

Not every city has successfully embraced bicycle commuting. Houston wanted to: It released a plan in 1994 to add 1,000 miles of bikeways, but never came close to completing it, and has had trouble even maintaining the lanes that already exist. Atlanta routinely gets singled out as the worst city in America for anybody who tries to commute to work on a bike. Earlier this year, Bicycling Magazine again ranked that city at the bottom of its list. Boston, which might appear to be friendly biking territory, never has been. Bike lanes there are scarce and not very well connected. Boston hired a bike-policy coordinator in 2001 but cut the position just two years later.

And there is pushback in some cities. In bike-friendly San Francisco, a five-year plan to create a network of bike routes, parking and racks all over the city has ended up in court. An opposition group is challenging the plan's scheduled reduction in parking and street space and has called for what it describes as a fairer balance in the use of public land.

The biggest lesson for cities, says Clarke, is that a successful bike-commuting policy is a combination of infrastructure, education and promotion. While cities must build the right facilities--bikeways, storage, parking--they also must help cyclists gain the skills and confidence to ride in traffic. Efforts in that direction may include bike route maps, for example, or the bike ambassadors that Chicago has been trying. Combining these elements, Clarke says, is key. "The places that have been successful at this have done much more than just add bike lanes."

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