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Bicycle commuting is a healthy, fuel-saving option - even in Seattle

By: David Nordmark, Journal Newspapers

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North Seattle resident Caroline Ullman rides her bike about 7.5 miles each way to work at the Seattle Public Library from her home in Maple Leaf. Photo: [www.marcusdonner.com](http://www.marcusdonner.com).

Rising gas prices might have you wishing that you could sell off your car and move to a fantasyland where nobody has to get behind the wheel in order to commute to work every day.

For some greater Seattle residents, that fantasyland is all around us.

Caroline Ullman has been bicycle commuting to her job at the Seattle Public Library for almost eight years. Her commute from Maple Leaf to downtown is about seven and a half miles.

"The reason I ride my bike to work is that I like to feel self-sufficient and that I'm contributing something to the environment," she said. "It's also a great way to get exercise. It's a lot cheaper than driving, that's for sure."

It certainly is. With gas prices hovering around \$4.25 a gallon, Ullman's 15-mile roundtrip commute would set her back \$12.75 (assuming a car that gets 25 miles to the gallon) each work week. And that's just for gasoline - not to mention parking, insurance and wear-and-tear to the car itself.

Riding a bike, on the other hand, is more or less free. One does have to buy the bike, and whatever fancy accessories seem appropriate, but the only fuel a bicyclist has to pay for is breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Of course, it's hard to give up the convenience of having a car. Our communities were designed to be navigated by vehicles that can cover a lot of distance quickly; hopping on a bike can mean losing a certain amount of flexibility regarding where you can go and how fast you can get there.

But the flexibility that comes with driving a car is getting more and more expensive. Furthermore, Ullman said, even though saving money is nice, there's a lot more to be gained from leaving the car at home.

"I love being in tune with both my body and the world," she said. "It's great to be outside and see an eagle fly overhead or hear a great blue heron squawking or be able to watch bunnies at Green Lake hopping around in spring. It's a real gift to be able to get to work that way. I'd encourage everyone to try it if they can."

Elliott Bronstein, who works in the Seattle Office for Civil Rights, has been at the bicycle commuting game since the early 1980s. For Bronstein, the list of benefits to riding a bike rather than driving is virtually endless.

"You never have to worry about finding parking," he said. "You never have to pay for parking, you always go to the front of the line at a traffic light and you rarely have to wait for anyone. So if you're an independent and impatient person, bicycling is perfect."

Though he bikes to work in almost any weather conditions ("I'm one of those people," he said), he does own a car and uses it whenever a bicycle won't do the job.

"I use it in the evenings, if I'm going to a movie or something," Bronstein said. "[Or] if I'm going to be grocery shopping and am going to get more than I can carry. I'm not a purist; I use a car whenever I need one."

As attractive as the bicycle commuting lifestyle seems in some ways, it's also a bit intimidating. Ullman and Bronstein have been biking to work for a long time, to the point where it just seems like the natural thing to do. Those of us still chained to our cars might need a little help converting to a new way of doing things.

Fortunately there are people around like Chris Cameron, director of bicycle commute programs for the Cascade Bicycle Club. Cameron has all kinds of advice for people eager to start biking to work but who aren't sure quite where to begin. The first thing many people wonder about is what kind of bike they should get.

"It depends on your level as a cyclist," Cameron said. "If you've been road cycling for a long time, a lot of people will gravitate toward a racing-type bike. But for the new commuter we usually recommend more of an upright bike."

The advantage of an upright bike is that it is easier for the rider to see down the road. A racing bike has drop-down handlebars that put the rider in a more aerodynamic position, which is good for speed, but not so good for paying attention to traffic.

Even with the upright bike, though, navigating through traffic on a bicycle is not something that happens instinctively. Cameron recommended that inexperienced bicycle commuters head out onto the road with someone who knows what they are doing in order to learn safe practices for

riding in traffic. The Cascade Bicycle Club also offers free clinics in downtown Seattle for people interested in learning to commute safely by bicycle.

Another problem for the new bicycle commuter is what to do with one's work clothes.

"There are a couple of strategies you can use," Cameron said. "You can take one to five days worth of clothing and store stuff [at work]." He also suggested finding a nearby dry cleaner and using it as a sort of closet away from home. Or as a last resort, you can roll your clothes up in a bath towel. "They usually have a 95 percent crispness factor," he said with a laugh.

Like any mode of transportation, the bicycle has its pros and cons. Those who ride on a regular basis to get where they're going share the belief that the benefits outweigh the negative aspects of biking.

"I just feel invigorated," Cameron said. "I don't need a coffee when I get to work, and I don't need a cocktail when I get home ... I also help my bank account, which from a selfish perspective is really good for me."

For more information about bicycle commuting programs, contact the Cascade Bicycle Club at [commute@cascadebicycleclub.org](mailto:commute@cascadebicycleclub.org).

### **Purchasing the right bicycle for commuting**

Todd Gallaher is a physical therapy aide at Northwest Hospital's Sports Medicine Clinic in Ballard. His job is to fit your bike to your body's specifications (or tell you that you need a bike that fits you better). If you're interested in purchasing a new bike, he has some recommendations for you:

1. Don't get a racing bike - you won't be able to attach fenders, racks or larger tires, all things you need for riding in the city.
2. Place lights on the front and back of your bike. The ones that blink are best because they stand out more.
3. Wear a reflective vest and bright clothing. Riders concerned about style should consider how they will look after getting mangled by a truck driver who couldn't see them in their fashionably dark clothing.
4. When standing over the center of your bike, there should be two to four inches of clearance between your groin and the straight bar that connects the seat to the handlebar.
5. Wear a helmet, and have it replaced every two years (the Styrofoam erodes and becomes brittle).
6. Don't buy a seat that's too hard (it will be uncomfortable) or too soft (it'll push up into soft spots on your body that are not supposed to make contact with the seat). Most new bikes come with seats that are meant to be replaced.
7. Wear gloves - they will keep you warm and protect your hands if you fall.
8. Wear shoes designed for biking - they will be narrower so they don't hit the bike as you pedal, and firmer so that the pressure from pedaling is distributed equally across your foot.
9. Wear bicycle shorts - they are snug and padded and won't bunch up and make riding uncomfortable.
10. Get your bike fitted to you by a professional - especially if you're feeling any pain while

riding. The fitting service at the Sports Medicine Clinic is often covered by health insurance companies, which view it as a physical therapy visit.

The Sports Medicine Clinic is located at 1551 NW 54th Street, Seattle. Their telephone number is (206) 782-0218.