

Seattle P-I, 9/14/08

City's bike plan has more than commuters in mind

Some car-friendly routes may soon favor cyclists

By [JENNIFER LANGSTON](#)

P-I REPORTER

Cathy Tuttle doesn't own a stitch of Lycra, yet the mother of two still prefers to do errands or visit friends in other neighborhoods by bicycle.

But Seattle's cycling network -- even with its enviable urban trails and a burgeoning network of bike markings on busy streets -- doesn't always make that easy.

Riding past Roosevelt High School with her 8-year-old son, she realized she'd worry about him biking to school in that area, even as a teenager.

Nearly a year after passing an aggressive bicycle master plan, Seattle has added more than 50 miles of new bicycle lanes, shared-lane markings, directional signs and other improvements. Most upgrades so far have appeared on busier arterials, part of the city's strategy to better connect Seattle's sporadic on-street bicycle facilities.

"They serve people who are expert commuters; they don't necessarily serve people with kids or going to get groceries," said Tuttle, founder of Spokespeople, a group that sponsors monthly rides connecting neighborhood centers. "If we're really talking about addressing climate change, we need that demographic."

She favors bike boulevards -- low-traffic, neighborhood streets meant to be convenient for bicycles, less so for cars. They can include traffic circles, speed bumps, signals that allow cyclists to cross streets easily, and even diversions that prevent cars from turning onto the boulevards.

Portland, where the existing bicycle network is nearly triple the size of Seattle's, has about 30 miles of bicycle boulevards. Increasingly, that's the city's focus.

They can be a good compromise, many say, between completely separated trails that are expensive to construct and free-flowing traffic that can intimidate novices.

"A lot of people find it more pleasant than traveling next to cars moving at higher speeds and exhaust and noise pollution you have on other streets," said Denver Igarta, a Portland transportation planner. "Ideally, it's almost like a parklike setting."

Seattle is experimenting with its first bike boulevard on Fremont Avenue North in Greenwood, though there's little signage indicating it.

On that already slow, leafy street with plenty of traffic circles, cars traveling in certain directions now must turn right or left onto North 80th and North 85th streets; only bicycles and pedestrians can go straight.

Seattle's plan envisions 18 miles of bicycle boulevards over the next decade. That compares with 140 miles of bike lanes and 110 miles of sharrows, or pavement markings encouraging bikes and cars to share the road.

That could shift as experimenting with bike boulevards pans out, said Pete Lagerwey, a senior planner and bicycle expert for the Seattle Department of Transportation.

"Putting in bike lanes was more of a known, and in terms of our ... stakeholders, that was clearly the next step," he said. "But we're doing one bike boulevard, and as we get more comfortable with it and figure it out, you're going to see more."

Bicycle-friendly accolades

Seattle recently was named a gold level community by the national League of American Bicyclists -- something achieved by only a few other cities.

"There are some great bones to build on and great trails to be connected and the beginnings of an on-street network that especially downtown really needs to be beefed up," said Andy Clarke, the league's president. The Bridging the Gap street maintenance levy Seattle voters approved in 2006 included \$27 million to build bicycle facilities. Seattle also has a complete streets policy so that whenever routine paving is done, engineers try to improve streets for bicycles and pedestrians.

The bike plan lays out two simple but ambitious goals: tripling bicycle use and reducing crashes by one-third within a decade.

Cyclists and motorists are beginning to notice improvements, including short green bike lanes at a dozen locations citywide to make bicyclists more visible at intersections. The beginnings of a way-finding system have been installed.

But there are still broad gaps in on-street bicycle facilities, with lanes appearing and disappearing depending on how much room Seattle's quirky and narrow streets offer.

"If you were going down the freeway and suddenly your lane ended, we wouldn't accept that as car drivers," said Michael Snyder, a software engineer and bike advocate for Seattle Likes Bikes.

Ben Jones, who commutes from Wedgwood to Kirkland largely on the Burke-Gilman Trail, noticed a curious five-block-long bike lane that appeared on 25th Avenue Northeast.

"It's kind of like a bike lane to nowhere," he said. "But it's not easy to just go in and plop bike infrastructure down. It's a gradual type of thing ... we've got to be in it for the long haul."

Seattle is relying heavily on the fairly new sharrow concept -- lane markings with white arrows and a bicycle painted on the pavement indicating that cars and bikes should share the lane. They're typically used on streets too narrow for dedicated bike lanes or on inclines where cyclists can more easily match the speed of cars.

Some -- who say sharrows can be confusing because drivers don't understand them -- question how much good they do. But confusion isn't always bad if it forces motorists to be more careful, Lagerwey said.

Seattle also is participating in a University of North Carolina study measuring whether sharrows help prevent cyclists from getting squeezed between automobile traffic and parked cars.

"We want to know if putting in sharrows changes behavior," Lagerwey said. "Every indication we see is that it's all good, but it would be nice to document it."

Bigger debates ahead

Other controversies over the bike plan have quieted down. Plans to squeeze Stone Way North in Wallingford from four lanes to three and add a bike lane unleashed a storm among area businesses that feared gridlock and cyclists who believed the city wouldn't stand up for them.

Although there have been a few complaints and angry confrontations, several business owners and employees now say the plan seems to be working fine. Paula Baker, who owns the Gypsy Java Cafe, was concerned initially about the street changes' effect on garbage trucks turning in front of her store but hasn't noticed any backups.

"It seems to have worked itself out and seems to go really smoothly," she said.

For now, Seattle has plenty of uncontroversial, low-hanging fruit to tackle in upgrading its bike network. But difficult discussions may follow.

Some argue the best way to make streets safer for cycling is to reduce car traffic, including making often unpopular changes to make driving more expensive or inconvenient.

Almost none of the projects in the bike master plan would take away parking, for instance.

"I don't know exactly when we'll turn the corner on that," said David Hiller, advocacy director for the Cascade Bicycle Club. "There are going to be people who grew up in the era of unlimited auto mobility ... without realizing there are unintended and unacceptable consequences."

But undoubtedly there will be debate over competing needs for limited public street space among cars, sidewalks, street cafes, bike lanes, parking spaces, business drop-off zones, bus-only lanes and truck routes.

Riding along Alki Beach during an experimental Sunday road closure this month, it was great to see people hula hooping and skateboarding in the streets, said Barbara Culp, a 59-year-old car-free bike commuter.

"We've done a really good job in Seattle in thinking about the climate and greening our city and recycling, and I'm just very eager for more car-free spaces," she said.

WHAT BIKE MARKINGS MEAN

BIKE LANES -- Dedicated for bicycles, marked by white striped or solid lines and an image on the pavement of a person riding a bike.

SHARROWS -- Indicates cars and bicycles should share the lane, marked by white chevron arrows pointing in the direction of traffic and a bicycle. Drivers should be aware that cyclists are likely to travel on this street.

CLIMBING LANES -- Typically includes a bicycle lane on the uphill side of the street to give slower cyclists extra room. A sharrow on the opposite downhill side indicates faster-moving cyclists are likely to be in traffic.

GREEN BICYCLE LANES -- Abbreviated green lanes to give cyclists dedicated space at intersections where conflicts with cars are likely, particularly where cars may be turning right while bicycle riders are going straight.

BICYCLE BOULEVARD -- A low-traffic street designed to allow cyclists to travel more comfortably than on a busy arterial. Traffic circles, diverters or quick-response crossing signals may be used to slow cars and make the street more bicycle-friendly.

Source: Seattle Department of Transportation

P-I reporter Jennifer Langston can be reached at 206-448-8130 or jenniferlangston@seattlepi.com.