

WHAT ABOUT BIKEWAYS?

by John Forester

Social reactions which have already been acted out in tentative steps could well destroy cycling as we know it. This has happened because there are more cyclists, but also because short-sighted enthusiasts have promoted the cause of cycling in ways that have long range detrimental effects.

Cycling in the US and Canada is an anomaly, occupying a far different and inferior situation than it does anywhere else in the world, which should suggest caution and additional study before every promotional attempt. Yet we see cyclists promoting social actions that have already proved worthless and self-defeating in European countries.

Although many families can now afford a car in Europe, there exists there a large body of custom and legal precedent that the bicycle is legitimate transportation. In the US, on the other hand, the bicycle didn't exist from around 1920 to 1965 (except for the war years 1942-1946). Only school children and paperboys rode. Sure, some of us did, but we were ignored. By and large, the cyclist was a kid playing in the street. Adult cyclists were generally respected—there were too few to be a “nuisance” to auto drivers.

Now we have 10 to 50 times as many cyclists, enough to be uncomfortably visible, yet not numerous enough to control politics; we never will be. The average motorist will not change his lifelong opinion of cyclists. (A problem even in Europe, with its far more sympathetic background. My English father used to call cyclists “road lice”, even though he couldn't afford a car until he was 32.)

This situation helps crystallize the opposition to bicycling legislation—self-destructive legislation in any case, because it asks too much from a powerful enemy.

The worst thing cycling is promoting is the bikeways movement. Our minority, generally non-affluent people,

The less controversial side of bikeways (no cars around at all).

John Forester's question is: Bike-ways or equal rights on the road? (G. Beinhorn)

is promoting a two-pronged scheme to acquire far more than our fair share of the road system, or else to have another system constructed for our exclusive use. Road systems are too expensive and important—we may get our share, but we will be stuck with exclusive rights of way and no means of paying for acquisition and construction.

We used to have access to very nearly as much of a magnificent road system as we could ever use, and we are giving this up for permission to ride in Central Park or some such place. (You laugh? Have you ever ridden on Mexican roads, or Belgian *pave*, or in the Balkans? Try it and see for yourself.)

Even in its immediate effects—those I notice every day—the bikeways movement has born evil fruit. Palo Alto, Calif. has a recently-introduced bikeway system, ostensibly promoted as a safety measure. On many streets large amounts of road space and roadside parking space have been set aside for the exclusive use of cyclists, much to the annoyance of motorists and local householders and businessmen.

Palo Alto is well planned. Through-town traffic is channeled into one north-south and one east-west street. Other



streets rather deliberately don't go anywhere, but serve only as neighborhood branches.

Middlefield (north-south artery) is heavily travelled in some sections. In those areas, parking is prohibited and four lanes are painted in. There is no room for bike lanes.

In the residential areas, the city council felt they could not prohibit parking to create bike lanes. Here they said, in effect, “You want your bike lanes. Since there's no room on the road for you, we'll prohibit riding on the road and you can ride on the sidewalk.” That's political realism—ironically, we got what we asked for.

The sidewalk is dangerous: even a brisk pedestrian rarely walks faster than 2.5 mph, while average cyclists do 10-12 mph. It's like putting 18-mph cyclists on a 70-mph freeway. Furthermore, there are no rules of the sidewalk—anybody may walk in any direction he chooses, stop, start, and turn anywhere. I know of two pedestrian fatalities caused by cyclists already—one in San Jose a month ago and one reported by a friend in Minneapolis. And cars cross the sidewalk everywhere. A car emerging from its hedge-lined driveway may

be quite safe for pedestrians, who travel slowly and stop in one step, but it is highly unsafe for cyclists. At intersections the same rule holds—the motorists are supposed to stop for crosswalk traffic, but they never allow for anything faster than a pedestrian.

There are other nasty aspects of the Palo Alto bikeway scheme. Cyclists are prohibited from all parts of the bike-lane street except the bike lanes, so left turns must be made without leaving the lane. The cyclist proceeds on the right to the far side of the intersection, then stops to see what he can safely do before starting in the new lane.

Certain streets have narrow bike-lanes with daytime parking prohibited but nighttime parking allowed. Cyclists are allowed to ride at night with proper lighting equipment, but the lane may be filled with parked cars. (I confess that while I disapproved of the whole thing—it was tried in England with the same consequences, and didn't last—I kept quiet in order not to weaken the "cycling movement.")

I still ride Middlefield 14 times a week to and from work and on other social activity. The school children on the sidewalk shout to me to join them. But at 20 mph, should I?

A city bus driver drove beside me for a block, shouting through his open door. Horns are more frequent. Today a small Toyota overtook me on the four lane segment, passing me with one foot clearance, then cutting in a foot from my wheel to drive six inches from the curb. At the next red light I squeezed beside the driver. "You gave me very little room—that's dangerous and you shouldn't do it." "You," he replied, pointing at me for emphasis, "should have some regard for the law." The new regulation, constitutional or not, has now made this kind of driver feel justified in running a cyclist off the road.

A policeman pulled alongside the other day, asking me to ride on the sidewalk. I replied, "That's an interesting theory but an illegal order," and kept on riding for another mile. He did nothing, and the regulation will probably remain untested until some poor cyclist gets knocked down by a dangerous driver, only to find that the driver is neither prosecuted nor made to pay expenses because the cyclist "shouldn't" have been on the road.

If we fight for bikeways on two fronts we can prevent abridgement of our legal rights, and we can improve our public image to the extent that the general public will support laws against the

few motorists who oppress us. What are these two fronts? First is the fight against specific laws that limit cycling. Prohibiting us from the street is probably not legal, but it is being done.

I aim to get arrested to test the Palo Alto municipal ordinance in the courts, but that will not of itself be sufficient. More reasons are required to kill these prohibitions, before they are enacted. The best reason is safety, because safety was the prime talking point used to promote the bike lane scheme. The only kind of accident the bike lane may prevent is one in which an overtaking car knocks down a well-behaved cyclist. It will not prevent any driveway, parking car, or intersection accidents.

The Palo Alto statistics are vague, but they suggest that less than 15% of auto-bicycle accidents will be affected by bike lanes. For that possible reduction we receive in exchange the dangers of riding on the sidewalk or too close to parked cars.

Besides fighting specific laws, we can carry on a general fight to maintain the street and highway system as a public utility open to all users if they do not render it unsuitable for other users. You may recognize Uncle Tom-ism in this, but the fact is that we are an uninfluential minority. We haven't the political clout to grab more than our share; we can only receive our share by the proper policy of a fair share for all.

Legal precedent and economics will support us. A longstanding right existed in England and emigrated to the US: freedom of travel on the public highway. This right has been regulated only to the extent of protecting other users' similar rights.

Some highways have been specially constructed for high speed traffic, with limited access and user rights, but this limitation does not conflict with the principle of free use of the highway system as long as the pre-existing slow-speed, unlimited-access roads serve other traffic. Only in those few areas where a high-speed freeway has wiped out the existing road does infringement exist, and these cases have been solved in principle (though not publicly acknowledged) by either permitting access or constructing a frontage road or path.

This freedom-of-the-roads approach was one of the considerations in England, where in the late '40s a tentative bikeway system, started before the war, was discarded because of action by cycling interests and other parties. The English cycling movement recognized it was not powerful enough to grab roadway away from others, but was able to

raise enough legal influence to prevent being denied the roadway. We may not be able to raise the influence.

Economics and sociology provide useful arguments. The highway system is an expensive, highly developed public utility, but the actual cost of cycling on it is almost nothing. Individually, each cyclist produces no measurable wear.

Not even motorists use all the road all the time. It makes sense to allocate the available roadway to each user as he needs it, rather than have unique paths for each class of user. This is sharing for the common good, at lowest cost to everybody. To reestablish the road-sharing principle, we need to convince people that it makes sense in general, and we have to convince them that we cyclists are legitimate members of the using community. This is going to take some doing, given the course of US traffic history since 1920 and our actions of the last year or two.

Public opinion exists in two forms. To get results we must affect both. The first is general public opinion: "the man on the street." The second is organized public opinion that is embodied in functional organizations and pressure groups: law enforcement agencies, legislatures, traffic and highway departments, automobile clubs, truckers' associations, and the like. We can best improve our image with the general public by improving bicycle riders' road behavior. Touring clubs generally try to educate their members in road behavior, while racing clubs usually don't bother much.

It should be the nationwide policy of both kinds of clubs to make their cyclists understand that club cycling is the showcase. The majority of bike riders, however, are not cyclists, and can only be reached by other means. We should have a national policy, with cycling education material used to promote training in clubs and local public bodies such as school districts, police departments, service clubs.

General public opinion and organized public opinion interact—one tells the other. If we favorably influence both we will be able to resist pressure from those who travel faster or pay more taxes than we.

Lots of publicity and politics gets us bikeway fiascos, so we must influence the centers of power to accommodate our legitimate interests. We know we are legitimate road users, but they don't remember this, unless reminded.