

Can Pittsburgh learn to love bikes?

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By Tatyana Margolin, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

Just after 5 p.m. on the last Friday of each month, cyclists gather by the dinosaur outside the Carnegie Library in Oakland. They linger, socializing as rush hour thickens. When it's just right -- bumper to bumper -- they launch, en masse, into the middle of it.

These are the people of Critical Mass, bike riders who band together to assert equal rights on the road -- and to promote the benefits of biking.

But while the group here is small, attracting 20 to 60 riders a month, many believe a critical mass of bicyclists -- activists or not -- is one ingredient that Pittsburgh needs to become the kind of hip place that attracts talented young workers now and in the future.

"A bicycle-friendly city is a more forward-thinking place, with more open people and a more natural lifestyle," said Christian Reed, 23, a graduate student at Carnegie Mellon University. Computer scientists, graphic designers, artists and other members of what Carnegie Mellon University professor Richard Florida calls "the creative class," love to bike, Reed said.

Bicycling Magazine in 1990 ranked Pittsburgh among the 10 worst biking cities in the country. Portland, Ore., a city known for its quality of life and as a place that draws young people, was ranked the best biking city.

Pittsburgh officials say the magazine's rating spurred a number of efforts that have erased any possibility of a repeat performance. And while avid cyclists don't view Pittsburgh as a biking paradise and see the actions taken so far as baby steps, neither do they think it's still among the country's worst.

Tough commute

Three mornings a week, C.J. Mikkelsen of Friendship loads her bike onto a bike rack and gets on the bus.

Mikkelsen became a bike commuter after the Port Authority put bike racks on buses. "I had never taken public transportation before, but in the last two years, I have," she said. "By the



C.J. Mikkelsen puts her bike on the front of a Port Authority bus in Friendship on her way to work. She and her husband, Mick, then ride their bikes home from work. (Darrell Sapp, Post-Gazette)

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time I get home from work, I forget all about my problems of that day."

Though 3.2 million Americans bike to work at least once a week, in Pittsburgh, Mikkelsen is one of a very small group -- estimated by several groups as between 50 and 100.

"Compared with other cities, such as Eugene, Ore., and San Francisco, commuting by bicycle in Pittsburgh does not exist," said David Skillman, who has lived and cycled in both cities.

One major reason why so few commute by bike in Pittsburgh is that it's perceived to be "unreasonably dangerous," said Amy Ring who has also lived in Boston, Seattle and San Francisco. "Pittsburgh drivers are completely unaware of pedestrians and cyclists."

Pittsburgh police have registered only one critical injury for a cyclist this year. And in the past five years, the numbers have remained steady, with one to two critical injuries a year, though Allegheny County Coroner Dr. Cyril Wecht has recorded three cycling fatalities since 1998.

Aside from fear of injuries, a major impediment to more commuting in Pittsburgh is that there aren't enough biking facilities.

Mikkelsen commutes one way only because she lacks shower facilities at work where she should could change from bike clothes into a business suit. Others write off commuting for lack of secure bike parking and shower facilities.

Those concerns will be eased somewhat when the Port Authority opens its Bike Station facility, expected by the end of the year. It will stand next to the First Avenue light-rail station near the Eliza Furnace Trail and will include secure bike lockers, bike rental, showers and bike maintenance services, as well as a snack bar.

Policies at some institutions also inhibit biking commuters.



Members of Critical Mass cross the 10th Street Bridge earlier this year. (Lake Fong, Post-Gazette)

"I quit riding to work because they wouldn't let me bring my bike inside," said Joanne Flynn, assistant professor at the University of Pittsburgh. While at Pitt, Amy Enrico stopped for the same reason -- her bike wasn't allowed inside the School of Public Health.

Kathleen Miller, who handles alternative transportation policies for Pitt, pointed out that the university provides outside racks and secure lockers for cyclists. But what about the avid cyclists who work far from the secure lockers and fear leaving their bicycles outside?

"Some people come here with really nice cars, and they might want to bring their cars into the office," said Miller. "I guess there is some amount of risk that's part of anybody's commute."

At Carnegie Mellon University, the picture is different. You can store your bike in your

office. Just don't ride down the hall.

Three steps away

Compared with leading biking cities, Pittsburgh's policies are not adequately conducive to encouraging commuters, bike experts say. However, conditions have improved.

The city has built bike trails, the Port Authority has equipped some buses with bike racks and cycling advocates have surfaced.

"We are getting there," said Mayor Tom Murphy, himself an avid cyclist, adding that Pittsburgh is three steps away from becoming a great city for biking.

It must increase the miles of off-road trails, improve the system of marking and signing bike routes and create bike stations for cyclists to safely store bikes, he said.

Federal money, allocated under TEA-21 (Transportation Equity Act for the 21st century) could finance the improvements if it's released by the government. And the city would provide the labor.

Murphy pointed to the number of bike trails as proof of his dedication to cycling. Since taking office, he has worked on a new parking station and new signs that will direct cyclists from one trail to another.

Even the most jaded bike commuters praise the Eliza Furnace Trail, a 2.6-mile stretch connecting Greenfield with Downtown. Murphy opened it in 1998 at a cost of \$200,000.

David Rollins, a Carnegie Mellon student, called it "the shining star of Pittsburgh for cyclists. I can get from CMU to Downtown without riding more than a mile on an actual road."

Eliza Furnace still lacks a connection to other trails, though. Downtown, it stops near the jail without signs for a nearby bicycle-friendly route, emblematic of a major issue facing Pittsburgh cyclists.

"When I first came here, I was gung-ho to ride in this city," said Christian Reed, a Vermont native. "They've got parks, I thought, so I'll be able to mountain-bike here. Turned out that the trails are far [apart] and disconnected."

"We are missing several connection points," agreed Andy Baechle, director of Friends of the Riverfront, a group that works on continued expansion of the bike trails.

"One [connection] is near Sandcastle on the south shore of the Monongahela. The Hot Metal Bridge [spanning the Monongahela between the South Side and Hazelwood] is another. We are also trying to do a temporary trail construction in front of Heinz Field."

Having a plan

Successful bicycling programs have political leadership, organized cycling constituents and a responsive administrative staff, including engineers and landscape architects, said Ben

Gomberg, Chicago's cycling coordinator.

Great biking cities also have comprehensive Bike Plans, which outline goals and deadlines.

An organized cycling constituency is beginning to coalesce in Pittsburgh. It is small compared with those in other, better-known biking cities, but momentum is building.

Last year, after he was struck while biking by a car that did not stop, David Hoffman started Bike Pittsburgh, Western Pennsylvania's only cycling advocacy organization. The 75-member group wants to make the city safe, accessible and friendly to bicycle transportation.

"The cities that are really doing a terrific job at accommodating cyclists consider the bicycle almost every time a road project comes about," said Bike Pittsburgh board member Louis Fineberg. "This kind of mentality does not exist here."

Though many argue with its pace, cyclists agree that progress has been made under Murphy's leadership.

Recently, Murphy adopted a comprehensive Bike Plan. While the plan lists creation of a full-time bicycling coordinator as one of the top priorities, the mayor does not plan to appoint one. He believes that city worker Hannah Ehrlich dedicates a sufficient amount of her time to cycling issues.

Cycling advocates disagree, pointing out that most bike-friendly cities have full-time cycling coordinators. Chicago has five full-time bicycling staff members and a set of consultants and interns. Portland, Ore., has three full-time employees.

Pittsburgh currently has fewer than five miles of bike lanes, and Murphy said creation of new bike lanes was his top biking priority for the year. He said he would create a team to determine streets eligible for bike lanes.

Sustainable Pittsburgh's Urban Cycling Committee, a coalition of groups representing the region's bicycling community, has already identified a number of city streets as potential locations for bike lanes and listed them in a letter to Murphy.

Most are in the East End and would serve to connect Frick, Schenley and Highland parks.

A second set of bike lanes is targeted for the South Side, complementing the South Side segment of the Three Rivers Heritage Trail. The third set is in the West End, providing a link from the West End toward East Carnegie and the Montour Trail.

Bikers say Pittsburgh has the fundamental elements of a great cycling city: challenging terrain, beautiful country roads and streets with bike lane potential.



Devon Yates, right, works with Dereci Lowe, 12, on replacing a wheel and repairing brakes on a bike at Multi-Tool in Wilkinsburg. Yates volunteers for Free Rides, a bike recycling program that distributes working bikes and teaches bike repair. (Pam Panchak, Post-Gazette)

"I have biked through many neighborhoods in Pittsburgh, made many friends and visited many shops on a whim," said Devon Yates, 24, of Highland Park, a mechanical engineer. "I came to love Pittsburgh through cycling, and have chosen to stay here because of it, though I am often frustrated with the obstacles."

Her latest obstacle was last month , when she joined 75 other cyclists for the monthly Critical Mass ride outside the Carnegie Library in Oakland.

They began moving slowly down Fifth Avenue amidst thick Friday evening rush hour traffic. A police car joined the Critical Mass ride on Forbes Avenue, eventually stopping it at the intersection of Craig and Baum. There, Yates and three other riders were arrested.

The four spent a night and jail on several charges, including failure to disperse, disorderly conduct and obstruction of public passage.

Yates, who is contesting the charges, was particularly disturbed by the last one. "We were not blocking traffic," she said. "We are traffic."

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