

Cycling commute gets chic, U.S. cities add paths

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By Kevin Helliker, The Wall Street Journal

Commuting to work by bike has renewed appeal right now. On top of health benefits -- like offering a chance to exercise without taking extra time -- it saves on the growing cost of fuel and even carries a certain cachet at the office.

A growing number of cities are making it easier to ride your bike to work -- erasing hurdles big and small, from securing bikes safely downtown, to taking bikes on public transit, to finding a discreet place to shower.

Eager to reduce traffic jams and pollution, cities including Chicago; Louisville, Ky.; and Portland, Ore. are adding biking-policy departments at city hall, constructing bike lanes or building bike stations where riders can park and shower. A 2004 survey of American cities found that more than 80 percent planned to build new bikeways. A new contest over which American cities are friendliest to cyclists has attracted 160 municipal contestants, each bragging about its bike lanes and lock-up racks.

Nationally, a bill introduced in the Senate last month would give employers a tax incentive to offer employees \$40 to \$100 a month to cycle to work, and a similar bill is pending in the House.

Buses and trains are allowing bikes to come on board in cities including Albuquerque; Washington, D.C.; and Boulder, Colo. In Chicago, Allison Krueger, a 26-year-old botanist, now can ride three miles to Union Station, catch a train to the suburbs, then cycle three more miles to her office. "The best part of cycling is the sheer joy of riding past people stuck in traffic," she says. Plus, she adds, "Biking is definitely fashionable in Chicago."

There are other signs that the cities' efforts are working. New York City opened a 17-mile bike trail on the West Side of Manhattan, along with bike paths on the bridges connecting the island to Brooklyn, in 2003 -- and has seen a 50 percent increase in cyclists since 2000, to 120,000 cyclists a day, according to advocacy group Transportation Alternatives. A three-year-old bike station in Chicago is poised to sell out 500 memberships for the third year in a row.

Since Louisville installed bike racks on its buses four years ago, cyclist boardings have nearly doubled to 91,000 in 2005 from 48,000 in 2002. And the percentage of commuters using bikes rises a point for every mile of bike lane added per square mile of American cities, said a 2003 study on bike lanes in the journal *Transportation Research Record*. The name of the study: "If You Build Them, Commuters Will Use Them."

One of the newest urban innovations: bike stations, which an increasing number of downtowns from various California cities to Washington, D.C., have added or are considering adding. Bike stations offer a safe place to park, along with lockers, showers and repair shops. The Chicago bike station, built and owned by the city, is run by a private company, which charges members \$99 a year for showers, towel service and a personal locker. Denver, Seattle and Berkeley, Long Beach and Palo Alto, Calif., all have similar bike stations.

The rising price of gas is adding to the appeal of cycling. Shipments of bicycles in the last year have been extraordinarily strong -- one of the two best years in the past two decades, says Tim Blumenthal, director of an industry coalition called Bikes Belong. "There's a lot of buzz right now about high gas prices," he says.

"The 5,000 miles I'll cycle this year are 5,000 miles I'm not putting on my car's odometer and fueling with high-priced gas," says Eric Carter, an attorney in Portland whose two-wheeled commute has helped him knock off 30 pounds.

In a trend reminiscent of previous public-health fashions, affluent professionals seem to be leading the charge of commuters on bikes, just as they were among the first groups to embrace organic food, to stop smoking and to return to feeding babies healthier breast milk rather than formula. "So far, it's a white-collar movement," says Dave Growacz, a Chicago biking official and author of the book "The Urban Bikers' Tricks & Tips."

Cycling has some serious disadvantages. A cyclist may arrive at work dripping sweat and with helmet-mashed hair -- and that's in good weather. J.P. Morgan Chase Vice President Luz Byrne no longer cycles on rainy days. "I got tired of washing the mud out of my hair in a sink," she says.

Managing the logistics of work-out clothes and office apparel is difficult. Jerry Roscoe, a cycling attorney in Washington, D.C., arrives each morning in biking clothes, grabs a shirt and suit from his office, goes to a nearby gym to shower, then returns to the office ready to work. "It's complicated," he says.

Of course, many bikers don't shower upon arriving at the office. Mr. Growacz's book offers tips on how to wear a helmet without messing up your hair.

The biggest downside of cycling is wrecks, particularly with cars. Per kilometer traveled, a cyclist in America is 12 times likelier than a car occupant to be killed, according to a 2003 American Journal of Public Health article.

Yet the number of cyclists killed in America fell nearly 10 percent to 724 during the decade that ended in 2004, according to federal statistics. And studies show that as the number of cyclists increase, collisions with automobiles decline because motorists become more alert to bikers' presence. As cycling in London increased 100 percent from 2000 to 2005, the accident rate for cyclists fell 40 percent, according to Transport for London.

The danger of cycling is far outweighed by the benefits, says Rutgers University's John Pucher, a professor of urban planning specializing in cycling issues. Cycling builds muscle, deepens lung capacity, lowers heart rate and burns calories. "The health benefits of cycling outweigh the health risks by two to one, if not something like five to one," says Dr. Pucher, whose voice mail describes him as "car-free John."

Commuter Essentials

As more cities encourage bike commuting, sales of bike gear are thriving. Sales of bike parts and accessories rose 12 percent last year, according to the Bicycle Product Suppliers Association. Here are some items that can ease the way from commuter time to computer time.

-- Matt Phillips

- **Baskets, racks and panniers:** Pedaling to work a power suit isn't for everybody. But carrying clothes in a backpack or messenger bag gets some riders extra sweaty. Racks mounted over wheels or panniers-like saddlebags can hold work clothes. Several companies also sell garment bags for suits that fit on bikes.

Suit bag from Two Wheel Gear, \$130.00

- ● **Lights:** At some point you'll be pedaling home in the dark, so front and rear lights are a must. They can cost anywhere from \$15 to \$150 each.

Standard light combo from Nashbar, \$14.99

- **Lightweight repair kit:** A must for the asphalt-and-sometimes-glassstrewn-jungle. Basic tool kits can cost around \$25. It's also good to carry a tire pump and a multi-tool for loosening bolts.

- **Pants clips:** These handy items help keep clothes grease-free, although some think rubber bands work just as well.

Metal pants clips from Inline, \$2.99

- **Coffee carriers:** For the caffeinedependent, there are handlebarmounted mug holders and insulated or vacuum-sealed containers that fit into bottle cages. Costs range from around \$10 to more than \$40.

Morning Rush Coffee Mug & Holder from Soma Fabrications, \$39.99

- **Bells:** Though shouts-and-gestures-might do for some drivers, a bell is more civilized. You can get the classic "bring-brring" for as little as \$3.

Big Brass Bell from Mirrycle, \$9.00

- **Rain Gear:** Into every bike commuter's life a little rain must fall. So take a small, waterproof jacket. They're available for as little as \$25, or as much as \$150.

- **Fenders:** Spray from your own tires can lash your face and back with mud. Fenders are a cheap solution.

Freddy Fenders from Planet Bike, \$34.99

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