

# Pittsburgh, the New Portland

By Howard Booth

## Bike Scene Burgeoning

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I recently spent a weekend in the mythical Northwestern city of Portlandia visiting my daughter Danielle and her partner, Jen. Except for the car ride from the airport (and we could have used the MAX light rail line to within three blocks of their home) all of our trips were by bicycle.

On a sunny Saturday afternoon, I borrowed Danielle's Surly Crosscheck, and we all rode to [VeloCult](#), which calls itself a "Portland bike shop, bar, café, and cultural hub." Where else but in Portland can you sip a tasty local microbrew, have your bike repaired, and take some classic snapshots in the antique photo booth in the corner! On our bikes over the next several days we shopped and went to dinner, and each evening I rode the trusty Surly back to the Monticello Motel.

Just prior to my Portland visit, I spent a week in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I didn't get a chance to bike, since I was working, but I was amazed at the cycling scene. I lived and biked in Pittsburgh for over 30 years. There were many lonely years when sightings of friendly cyclists were only slightly less rare than sightings of great white sharks off of Goleta Pier. It was awesome to see two-wheeling vibrant and alive in a city that a few years ago exemplified [Rust Belt geriatrics](#).

Portland and Pittsburgh are very different cities, but both are building exciting bicycle cultures. Pittsburgh is no Portland when it comes to cycling infrastructure, cutting-edge advocacy campaigns, or multitudes of bike-related events, but it has been called "one of the burgeoning bike scenes in North America" by *Good Magazine*.

Still, only 1.1 percent of workers commute by bike on Pittsburgh's hilly cobblestoned streets and 36 miles of bike lanes and trails. Pittsburgh's terrain ranges from the flats along the three rivers (extra bonus points to any reader who can name the fourth river) to short, steep cobblestone roads that march up the hillsides. If you want a daily biking challenge, try living on Canton Avenue, the steepest street in the United States. From the top of this cobblestoned street you can't even see the middle of the hill, as it descends at 37 degrees. Check out this [video](#) of cyclists trying to conquer Canton Avenue during the annual Dirty Dozen ride up the 'burgh's steepest hills.

Add summer humidity and winter snow and sleet to the challenges of terrain, and you see that the fact that the advocacy group Bike Pittsburgh has over 2,000 dues-paying members is an incredible success story. The group currently has five full-time staff (and one part-time membership assistant). They work with the city on all bike-related projects and are rolling out new advocacy and infrastructure campaigns relevant to the entire community. Bike Pittsburgh also sponsors events including an annual Bike Fest featuring events similar to our CycleMaynia.

Working out of the same warehouse space as Bike Pittsburgh, the collective called [Free Ride](#) offers bike repair and education programs using the same community-focused model that makes Bici Centro



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a Santa Barbara icon. Volunteers at Free Ride repair old bikes in order to earn their own. Each year they repair and put on the streets over 500 bikes. An open shop and bike-repair classes provide opportunities for community members to learn by doing.

Another key part of Pittsburgh's success has been the support of city and county politicians. Mayor Luke Ravenstahl is a strong advocate for infrastructure improvements that benefit cycling safety. The city also recently appointed Pennsylvania's first bicycle and pedestrian coordinator.

Pittsburgh has transformed itself from a Rust Belt steel town into a bike-friendly city. This is all the more remarkable considering that in 1999, only 13 years ago, *Bicycling Magazine* named it one of the country's 10 worst cities for biking. Fast-forward to 2010, and Pittsburgh wins the honor of being named a bronze-level Bicycle Friendly Community by the League of American Bicyclists. Mayor Ravenstahl is aiming higher, hoping to join cities like Denver, Austin, and Minneapolis in the silver class. Pittsburgh's leaders realize that bike-friendly cities are more attractive to young professionals, those creative-class folks who hold the keys to economic prosperity.

Richard Florida, economist and social scientist, believes that postindustrial cities can be resurrected by nurturing a creative class that includes scientists, educators, artists, researchers, and knowledge-based workers. These individuals are driving economic growth in old industrial cities such as Pittsburgh, Portland, San Francisco, Seattle, and Toronto. They do it by developing what Florida calls the three Ts: "Talent (a highly talented/educated/skilled population), Tolerance (a diverse community, which has a 'live and let live' ethos), and Technology (the technological infrastructure necessary to fuel an entrepreneurial culture)."

Florida coined the term street-level culture to describe the vibrant and experiential environment that the creative class wants as part of their daily lifestyle. This includes a "teeming blend of cafes, sidewalk musicians, and small galleries and bistros." Florida's young professionals also want to enjoy an active lifestyle. They want to be able to walk out their front door and bike, surf, run, kayak, sail and hike.

A bike culture is part of what is making Pittsburgh, like Portland and Santa Barbara, attractive to young professionals. In Santa Barbara, we have street-level culture in abundance: the Sunday art market along Cabrillo, 1st Thursday (art events and Bike Moves), and the edgy Funk Zone, as well as the State Street shops, clubs, and cafes.

Our bike scene is alive and growing. The Santa Barbara Bicycle Coalition/Bici Centro is a strong advocate for cyclists and is supporting the growth of events that build excitement and community. Our mayor and many local politicians believe in the value of cycling and alternative transportation. We're ahead of Pittsburgh in miles of bike lanes and percentage of workers commuting by bike. Watch out Portland — we're catching up!

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