

As more workers make the commute by bike, cyclists campaign for rights, improved safety

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By Annie Tubbs, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Between an increase in trails and bike lanes in and around Pittsburgh and the higher price of gas, more and more people are opting to leave their cars in the driveway and hop on a bike.

It's not just those who live near Downtown -- suburbanites are realizing the benefits of bike commuting, too.

"There are more people riding from farther away than people intuitively think," said Mike Boyd, a Chatham University professor of music. He commutes from his home in Wilkins to the Shadyside campus three or four days a week.

He said there's a misconception about the "bikeability" from suburban neighborhoods into the city; he and other cyclists from the eastern suburbs said they hope to change that.

About 10 cyclists from Wilkesburg, Edgewood, Swissvale, Forest Hills, Wilkins and Churchill have formed Share the Road East, an advisory committee that wants to identify bike-friendly routes between eastern communities and routes that would link to bike trails that go into Pittsburgh.

Mr. Boyd, 33, said that while advocacy for bike commuting has boomed in Pittsburgh, bike racks and designated bike lanes pretty much cease to exist once you get outside the city limits.

He often bikes to Wilkins meetings, and he locks his bike to a fence outside the township building because there are no bike racks.

He said that Share the Road East hopes to add bike routes from the eastern suburbs to a map produced by Bike Pittsburgh, a bike safety and advocacy organization that focuses on the city.

Between the suburbs and the city, "there are a lot of doable routes," Mr. Boyd said.

Scott Bricker, executive director of Bike Pittsburgh, agreed.

In the "inner-ring" suburbs, "riding a bike for transportation is a very viable option," he said, but in "sprawl-oriented" places such as Cranberry, it's nearly impossible to get to bike-friendly roads and trails without hitting a highway first.

Respect road and each other

Some cyclists who commute from the suburbs into the city said that respecting the road, other cyclists and drivers is the first step to staying safe.

Stephen Taylor commutes from Glenshaw to Downtown five days a week, year round.

GETTING STARTED

More information on commuting to work by bike:

Allegheny Cycling Association

102 W. Ninth St., Aspinwall

www.acaracing.com

info@acaracing.com

Bike Pittsburgh

3410 Penn Ave., Lawrenceville

412-325-4334

bike-pgh.org

info@bike-pgh.org

Free Ride

214 N. Lexington St., North Point Breeze (inside Construction Junction)

412-731-4094

freeridepgh.org

freerideyouthprograms@gmail.com or freeridevolunteer@gmail.com

Share the Road East

Mike Boyd: mboyd50@gmail.com

The trip is about nine miles each way, and it takes him 35 or 40 minutes to get Downtown.

"It's a little bit slower than driving, but there are some mornings when I rip past the cars," he said.

Mr. Taylor, originally from England, has been cycling since he was 4. He said the culture in Europe is totally different than the United States when it comes to biking and walking as viable means of transportation.

"Over there, cycling is definitely more acceptable," he said.

Mr. Taylor, 48, said he always stops at stop signs and red lights, which may seem elementary, but he said drivers get upset when they notice cyclists who blow through red lights.

"Respect the road," he said. "Respect the fact that you are a cyclist and you are a vehicle."

In 20 years of cycling, he said he's had only about half a dozen altercations with drivers.

"There are people out there who are going to give you a hard time," he said, adding that he's "pleasant to a point" and tries not to swear back.

"I'm a vehicle on the road just like you. I belong here," he said.

Brian Janaszek commutes by bike from his home in Morningside to his office on the South Side three to four days a week. He said being safe on a bicycle is tied with being predictable.

"If I mostly act like a car, other road users will know what to expect," he said.

Mr. Janaszek, 38, who has been commuting nearly full time for 10 years, said that in his most recent run-in with a driver, he was "doored" on Centre Avenue.

He moved right because a bus was coming up behind him, and a driver opened his door without looking.

"I wasn't injured, but my bike [was] damaged a bit," he said. "Ideally, I would have taken the lane and made the bus slow up behind me, but ... I made a bad decision."

Art Manion commutes by bike from Mt. Lebanon to the Carnegie Mellon University campus in Oakland four days a week.

To stay safe, he has "hundreds of dollars invested in flashing lights," and he wears an orange jacket and, of course, a helmet during his commute.

Despite the safety measures, he was injured in an accident in Mt. Lebanon two and a half years ago. A car ran a stop sign and Mr. Manion, 40, hit the car as he was going through an intersection.

He was taken to the hospital by an ambulance, but fortunately had no serious injuries.

"Anything you're doing with cars is risky," he said.

And sometimes, taking that risk can end in injury or death. Two physicians from Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC were injured in a hit-and-run accident in Highland Park in May and a cyclist was killed when she was run over by a tractor-trailer in Hempfield in July. Susan A. Belli, 28, of Greensburg, died of trauma to the head and chest. She was not wearing a helmet.

All bicyclists interviewed for this story emphasized the importance of wearing a helmet.

Know the law

Sometimes, altercations between drivers and cyclists are simply due to ignorance of the law and the rights of cyclists.

Jonathan Lomax of Lawrenceville, who worked as a courier for two years, said that "anyone that's been on two wheels has at least a horror story or two."

He was riding in Oakland, and a man in a car who was riding close to him, seemed to get more and more impatient.

Then, near the intersection of North Craig and Bayard streets, the driver

aggressively cut him off, nearly hitting him, and turned onto Bayard toward Shadyside, Mr. Lomax said.

Mr. Lomax, 27, who was on his way home from work as a bike messenger and didn't have anywhere to be, opted to follow him.

He trailed the driver to the intersection of Morewood and Centre, at which point the driver came to a stop at a red light.

Mr. Lomax laid his bike down in front of the car and said, "We really need to talk about what you just did."

He explained to the driver that bicyclists belong on the road, not the sidewalk, and the driver told him to email him the section of the law that states cyclists are supposed to be on the road.

Mr. Lomax said he told the man, "I just chased you through Shadyside. I'm not kidding" and eventually convinced him of cyclist's rights without any yelling or swearing.

Mr. Bricker, of Bike Pittsburgh, said that 50 to 60 percent of people are "interested but concerned" about commuting by bicycle. Bike Pittsburgh has 1,500 dues-paying members and lots of community support for its advocacy and safety initiatives.

"This is a popular thing, it's not a marginal thing," he said.

Still, better pavement, colored bike lanes, and physical barriers between sidewalks, bike lanes and car lanes would ease some fears about biking and improve relations between drivers and cyclists, Mr. Bricker said.

"There are a lot of things we can do to make things better amongst all the different road users.

"When our streets are designed to accommodate more users in a safe way, those relations will improve."

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