Our Two-Wheel Transformation

We’re building bike lanes like crazy. It’s raising questions we need to answer.

By Alex Marshall

The taxi driver taking me from Chicago’s Midway Airport to Hyde Park was unequivocal about what he thought of all the bike lanes Mayor Rahm Emanuel was installing across the city. He named an intersection and said, with his voice rising as he took a hand off the wheel and gestured outside, “I could stand all day on the corner there and not see someone on a bike.”

That may or may not be the case, but the driver had put his finger on at least part of the truth. Cities and towns all over the country, ranging in size from Chicago and New York to the small towns I visited recently in Minnesota, are stripping streets for bike lanes at an astonishing rate. It’s part of a sea change in how we view our streets and what they’re used for.

Long the aftermath of transportation policy, bike lanes and bicyclists are now front and center. Mayors, council members and transportation department chiefs are routinely subtracting lanes that have been dedicated to Americans’ supposed beloved cars and giving them to people on bikes. “We’re definitely in something of a revolution here,” says Randy Neufeld, director of the SRAM Cycling Fund and a longtime cycling advocate in Chicago.

But amid these changes, few have stopped to ask whether bike lanes even work, and by what standards we can tell if they do. Street space is perhaps a city’s or town’s most valuable asset. When adding bike lanes, there’s a number of goals—sometimes conflicting ones—that policymakers must pick and choose from, such as how many cyclists should be using the lanes, whether traffic congestion is impacted (for both cars and bikes), the amount of economic development spurred and even general population health effects.

So with that in mind, I suggest that localities jumping on the bike-lane bandwagon do the following.

First, count how many people use bike lanes, both on individual streets and citywide. Set numerical targets for cycling use. If after a number of years targets aren’t met, be ready to make serious adjustments, including sometimes removing bike lanes. Which isn’t to say that all bike lanes need to be used equally. As with streets, highways and train lines, a system of bike lanes is a network, and so the parts, even those less used, contribute to the utility of the whole. Still, there needs to be some sort of evaluation on an ongoing basis about how useful a bike lane really is.

Second, count other things beside just the people on bikes. Moving toward a more bicycle-oriented city should be part of a number of goals, including reducing obesity, increasing walking, achieving cleaner air, producing business corridor development and lowering car ownership. All these goals can and should have metrics attached to them.

Third, move toward “protected bike lanes” which physically separate cyclists—via a row of parked cars or plastic barriers, for example—from dangerous car traffic. According to the advocacy group PeopleForBikes, the number of protected lanes nationwide now stands at 292, more than five times the number in 2010. Cyclists love these but they also represent the most significant investment of street space. Cities should adopt these at a reasonable pace, recognizing that moving too fast can provoke a backlash.

Fourth, pursue legal changes, typically at the state level, that will put more responsibility for accidents, and thus for safety, on people driving cars. Countries renowned for the quantity and quality of their biking, such as Denmark and Holland, do have a lot of bike paths and lanes. But cyclists there also freely mix with car traffic, with a self-evidence that doesn’t exist in the U.S. The demand for bike lanes has come about as a result between a motorist and a bicyclist and someone on the motorist. It’s a standard sometimes known as “default liability.”

“Here in the U.S., there is still this notion that all users are equally responsible,” says Paul White, executive director of Transportation Alternatives, a cycling advocacy group in New York City. “This is a false equivalence. In Europe, they start with the premise that if you’re driving a multi-ton vehicle, you have more responsibility than someone who’s not because you have more capacity to inflict harm.”

To my knowledge, no American state has made this change. But reworking these legal lines is ultimately as important as painting new lines on streets. This sort of change will discourage bike lanes from becoming a kind of ghetto for cyclists. I have had drivers in Brooklyn, where I live, politely (well, not always) tell me to “get in the bike lane” when I have unknowingly had to venture out into regular traffic.

And finally, don’t forget public bike-share programs. In denser cities, bike programs have the potential to ease the clutter of privately owned bikes around lampposts, street signs and bike racks. Instead of sitting on the street for hours or days unused, a public bike is ridden several times a day. But these programs have to be cheap for the user, even if that means subsidizing them with tax dollars or funding.

All in all, the move to more bike lanes and more bicycling is a great thing. Judging from its treatment in ads, television and movies, the once-humble bicycle is clearly in—even chic. But every revolution needs some means of moderation and evaluation.

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Are Cities Growing or Not?

As it turns out, there is no one answer.

If you read all the things pundits and researchers write about cities these days, you’d be pretty confused. Cities are either growing or shrinking. People either want to live in them or they don’t. Businesses are either gravitating to them or moving away. Maybe everyone likes cities now, but they won’t like them when they have kids. Or maybe middle-aged people don’t like cities yet, but will later on.

Now into the mix comes Thomas Freyman, a Ph.D. student in urban planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who makes a provocative argument: Central cities are losing population relative to their suburbs, and close-in neighborhoods are losing population relative to newer neighborhoods.

It’s a little jarring to see a guy with such a distinctly pro-urban orientation sound so much like Joel Kotkin, an unabashed proponent of sprawl. But in the process of laying out his argument, Freeman shows that the situation is a little more complicated than the typical pundit would admit. His basic point is that urban neighborhoods that were already developed in the past are home today to fewer residents than they had back then, especially in younger Sun Belt cities.

At first glance, this might seem counterven- tive, given all the publicity in the media—including this column—about how millennials love urban living and therefore downtown populations are growing. But if you dig a little deeper, Freyman’s research shows two other important trends.

First, the urban revitalization patterns of the last decade aren’t really about the number of people but about changing demographics and the changing distribution of wealth. Yes, fewer people live in neighborhoods close to downtown, but more people live in downtown. That’s because household sizes are smaller—there are more one- and two-person households now—and few people actually lived downtown 50 years ago. And even though fewer people live close in today, the people that do have more money.

Second, although this trend is true in some parts of the Sun Belt, it’s not true in others. In particular, it’s not true in Southwestern and Western cities. Sure, Houston has a large stock of vacant land in older neighborhoods near downtown. But, as Freeman notes, the list of six cities with the highest population increase in close-in neighborhoods includes Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Miami and San Jose, Calif. What all these cities have in common—and this is in contrast to Houston—has nothing to do with downtown or close-in neighborhoods. All five are land-constrained on the periphery and therefore growth has nowhere else to go.

It’s tempting to make the debate about urban revitalization a one-size-fits-all argument. But as Freeman’s numbers show, it’s not. Even where the population has gone down, economic activity has gone up. And there is a relationship between what goes on at the center and what happens on the fringe.

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