

Just A Little R-E-S-P-E-C-T Please!

Integrating Cycling into the Transport Network Through Bikeway Guide Signage

By Michael E. Jackson

The Problem

Bicycling is a wonderful travel mode that provides affordable, sustainable and enjoyable transportation to people everywhere. Unfortunately one barrier that prevents increased usage of bicycles for transportation purposes is the disrespect bicyclists too often receive from motorists and government agencies. Due in part to an annual multi-billion dollar worldwide advertising campaign by the motor vehicle industry there is no doubt that roadways are designed for automobiles. However the question of whether pedestrians and bicyclists belong on roadways is less clear.

In 1967 rhythm and blues singer Aretha Franklin's hit song, RESPECT, was a demand for equitable treatment from the significant other in the song character's life. It can also be viewed as an anthem for bicycle riders. A description in the October 4th, 2004 issue of *Newsweek* magazine provided by a Becca Hutchinson of Newark, Delaware, USA who began bicycle commuting a year earlier summarizes the lack of respect from motorists experienced by many bicyclists. *"On a bike on any given workday the aggression you feel from passing cars is immediate and powerful enough to shave you from the shoulder in an instant. It's hard to argue for your share of the road from two wheels."* Motorists frequently believe that bicyclists are interlopers on roadways bought and paid for by their fuel tax dollars. The presence of bicyclists on roadways is often resented by drivers and their passengers for many reasons including safety concerns and fears bicyclists impede legitimate roadway users. Many persons view bicyclists as second-class citizens who ride either because they cannot afford to own a car or because they are eccentrics. Ironically in America bicycle commuters are often well-educated and affluent individuals who indeed own cars but prefer to use their bicycles instead of their cars for many trips. While discussion about bicyclists and motorists often implies two distinct groups of individuals most adult bicyclists likely hold driver licenses and own or have access to cars.

A Solution

Changing public attitudes regarding the legitimacy of bicyclists on roadways is key to increasing bicycling as a transportation choice among the public. Advertising the benefits of bicycling through the same media channels used by the motor vehicle industry would not be very effective due to the limited amount of money available to purchase ad space. A more promising method is to increase the awareness of bicycling on public highways through the provision of bicycle facilities including bikeway guide, warning and regulatory signs, striping and pavement markings.

Installing bikeway facilities on roadways not only directly benefits bicyclists by making it easier to ride but also alerts the traveling public that bicyclists are indeed legitimate

roadway users. There is anecdotal evidence that the harassment directed at bicyclists from motorists result from misunderstandings regarding bicycling. In one northern California community bicycle commuters legally using the shoulders of a freeway reported persistent harassment from passing vehicles including horn honking, shouts, curses and having objects thrown at them. Even some California Highway Patrol officers would order bicyclists off the shoulder in the mistaken belief bicycling was prohibited.

Following the installation of warning signs alerting motorists to expect bicyclists riding on the shoulders along with a request to the local highway patrol barrack to remind their officers that it is legal for bicyclists to use the shoulders on this section of freeway complaints from bicyclists about harassment ceased. After officials from the Maryland State Highway Administration installed bikeway signs and pavement markings along a highway in southern Maryland bicycle club rider Jim Hudnall reported a marked improvement in how motorists reacted to bicyclists on that highway. Not only does bikeway designation legitimizes the presence of bicyclists on roadways it also encourages people to actually give bicycling a try.

It comes as no surprise that communities and nations considered the best places for bicycling are not shy about providing bikeway guide, warning and regulatory signs, striping and pavement markings on streets and highways. Several European countries use colored bike lanes to better distinguish roadway space set aside of bicyclists. Red, green and blue are used. Switzerland has developed a network of national bicycle routes criss-crossing the country identified by route numbers and radiating from train stations. Bikeway route signs inform passersby of communities and activity centers that can be accessed by the bikeway and often supplemented by information providing the distance to such destinations and/or the time needed to reach them. One Danish island is said to provide signed bikeway destination information so effectively that touring bicyclists need not consult maps to find their way around.

Common Reasons Given for Not Installing Bikeway Facilities

In the United States the *Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices for Streets and Highways* (MUTCD), published by the US Department of Transportation is recognized by law as the national standard for all traffic control devices on any street, highway, or bicycle trail open to public travel. The MUTCD devotes 27 pages to requirements for bicycle traffic control devices. Furthermore it defines bicycle facilities as, “a general term denoting improvements and provisions that accommodate or encourage bicycling, including parking and storage facilities, and shared roadways not specifically defined for bicycle use.” A companion publication, *Guide for the Development of Bicycle Facilities*, published by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) provides 77 pages of additional information to traffic engineers and others regarding bikeway design. Despite the existence of these publications that explain how to install bicycle facilities that are meant to accommodate or encourage bicycling most transportation departments in America are reluctant to do so judging by the scarcity of bikeway facilities on public roadways.

Traffic engineers have a tremendous amount of authority and influence regarding whether bikeway facilities will be installed on roadways under their jurisdiction. Most traffic engineers are licensed motor vehicle operators who drive daily and thus have first hand knowledge and experience regarding traffic conditions. Conversely most traffic engineers do not commute to work by bicycle or likely bicycle on the streets and highways they are responsible for maintaining. Without having a “handlebar perspective” traffic engineers are at a disadvantage regarding understanding issues affecting bicyclists relative to understanding issues affecting motorists. The lack of personally experiencing traffic conditions from the seat of a bicycle likely decreases the motivation of traffic engineers to authorize the installation of bicycling facilities to accommodate and encourage bicycling. Here are some reasons frequently given by traffic engineers and transportation planners for not installing bikeway facilities.

1. Fear of Incurring Legal Liability

Despite government laws and policies designed to encourage bicycling and despite the presence of documents like the MUTCD and AASHTO’s *Guide to the Development of Bicycle Facilities* traffic engineers often believe that the designation of a roadway as a bicycle facility will subject their employers to increased legal liability in the event a bicyclist is injured or killed while using that bikeway facility. These assumptions are commonly made without consulting their agency’s legal counsel.

One reason traffic engineers may not ride bicycles on roadways is because they feel it is too dangerous an activity. This is because they have not been trained to become a competent and confident bicycle rider. If they believe sharing roadways with motorists while pedaling a bicycle is too dangerous an undertaking for themselves naturally they are reluctant to encourage others to bicycle in traffic. Under these circumstances some engineers believe that by merely designating a roadway as a bikeway facility they are creating a negligent act that could result in such nasty consequences as losing their professional engineering licenses or being held personally accountable following the serious injury or death of a bicyclist.

Encouraging traffic engineers to discuss liability concerns of bikeway designation with their agency lawyers can provide reassurance that bikeway designation can be done without incurring an unreasonable risk of legal liability on their employers or themselves.

2. Fear of Attracting Incompetent Bicyclists

In order to legally operate a motor vehicle a driver must hold a valid operator’s license that is only issued to persons who demonstrate competency to drive on public roads. No licensing requirement applies to operating a bicycle. Therefore anyone able to stay upright, pedal and steer a bicycle is legally allowed to travel on most roadways by bicycle regardless of age or traffic ability. While some bicyclists only possess sufficient competence to ride in isolated places like residential cul-de-sacs and fenced-in playgrounds other bicyclists are competent to ride on any highway where bicycling is legal.

Some traffic engineers believe the designation of a highway as a bicycle facility implies the roadway is safe to bicycle on and will encourage bicycling by unsuited persons such as small children. It is important to remind traffic engineers that bikeway facility designation is not intended to guarantee anyone's safety and that the law requires bicyclists to understand and obey traffic regulations regardless of age. Parents and guardians are the best judge of where children shall ride. Typically children are not allowed to venture far from home without being in the company of a responsible adult.

3. Installation Cost and Maintenance

Another objection to the installation of bikeway facilities is their initial cost and future expenditures for sign, striping and pavement marking maintenance. Fortunately signs, striping and pavement markings are relatively inexpensive items compared to roadway construction and pavement maintenance for motor vehicles. Reminding engineers that the societal benefits of bicycling such as reduced fuel consumption, exhaust emissions, traffic congestion and improved health of bicyclists outweigh the costs of bikeway maintenance. Also like other transportation infrastructure expenses the costs of bikeway implementation and maintenance can be factored into a local transportation capital improvement program. Bikeway advocates can work with their elected officials to ensure there is both policy and monetary support for bikeway projects.

4. Sign Pollution

Some engineers feel that the addition of bikeway signs along certain roadways that are already burdened with a large number of traffic signs has the potential for further degrading the visual environment and quite possibly contribute to driver error by information overload. There are some situations where this is a legitimate concern and there are other situations where this is merely sounds like an acceptable excuse for not proceeding with bikeway implementation. Sound engineering judgment can often provide a way to install a bikeway without significantly degrading the environment.

Conclusion

Bicycling brings many benefits to individuals and societies and this activity ought to be encouraged. Unfortunately bicycling is often undervalued and misunderstood by both transportation planners and engineers and the general public resulting in benign neglect at best and open hostility at worst. One of the benefits of bikeway implementation is encouraging bicycling by legitimizing bicyclists as highway users.

By understanding reasons for the lack of overwhelming support of bicycling by traffic engineers, becoming aware of the rationales offered for not installing bikeways and effective responses to those rationales bikeway planners and other supporters of increased use of bicycles can more effectively give bicyclists the R-E-S-P-E-C-T they deserve from other roadway users.

