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## The U.S. Bike Lane Boom

Words by Andrea Newell



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As our series about the productivity and health benefits of people riding to work, [The Business of Biking](#), rolls on, cities are actively investing in bike infrastructure. Urban centers like Austin and even Memphis, once voted one of the worst towns for biking by [Bicycling magazine](#), are creating bike lanes in an effort to alleviate congestion and appeal to businesses with workers who might bike to work. [People for Bikes'](#) Martha Roskowski quoted [Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel](#), saying, "You cannot be a startup, high-tech economy and not be pro-bike."

In the SXSW Eco panel, *Bike Curious? Dutch Style Cycling in the US*, the City of Austin and People for Bikes (sponsor of our The Business of Biking series) talked about their bike lane plans and efforts, inspired by Dutch bike infrastructure and culture.

Richard ter Avest, senior advisor and team leader of a team of traffic designers at Goudappel Coffeng, talked about Dutch bike culture and why bicycling is important. Why the bike? "The obvious reasons are that bicycling is clean, healthy, cheap, safe and fun." Other reasons include:

- It creates cities that are attractive to bicyclists and they can compete for

incoming residents

- It increases the value of real estate
- It is a sustainable way to be mobile
- It alleviates the need for car accessibility
- It helps residents outside the city to get to other public transportation, such as buses or trains

ter Avest identified four types of bicyclists: recreation (U.S. is number one in this category), commuting, cycling to school and whole families. Data showed that in the Netherlands, 30 percent of all trips under five miles are bike trips and 10 percent of all trips under 7 miles are bike trips. Far from trying to tell people that they need to bike for all trips, he said, the idea is that people incorporate bicycling into their array of transportation choices. For very short trips, walking is best. For trips that are longer than walking and less than 5-7 miles, people could consider bicycling if there was bike lane infrastructure in place, and use cars or a combination of bikes and public transportation for longer trips.

Keeping this in mind, ter Avest said, is the best way to make a "Dutch-style cycling city in the U.S."

Nathan Wilkes is responsible for the planning, design and implementation of bicycle facilities in Austin Texas and works in the City's Public Works Department in the Neighborhood Connectivity Division. The City of Austin began its bicycling lane plan in 1998, but only gained real traction in 2009 (when it updated its plan), moving forward and creating 40 miles of bike lanes in the past year.

Embracing the Dutch philosophy of mixed transportation, the city focused first on short trips taken within the city in an area dubbed,

"the Ring of Congestion." What they found is that out of the 258,000 passenger vehicle trips that enter this area daily, 58,000 or 36 percent are less than 3 miles (squarely within the bike range identified by ter Avest). If only 15 percent of these trips were converted to bicycle trips, 9,000 trips or 5.5 percent, would be removed from that area, freeing up that space for the other cars.

"By creating bicycle facilities, we are creating additional capacity. Traffic runs better as people are spread out between cars and bikes." Wilkes said. The aim is not to tell people specifically not to drive, but to open up new avenues for people to use to get places.

In 2012, People for Bikes began the Green Lanes Project, selecting six cities (Austin, Chicago, Portland, San Francisco, Washington D.C. and yes, even Memphis) "to form a select partnership of leaders supporting the creation of next-generation protected bike lanes in America."

From their website, "Six focus cities will be selected to receive a suite of technical, financial and strategic resources and opportunities to network with peers on the development of protected lanes. The winning cities will have a mix of political will, committed staff, and community support to implement ambitious plans for protected bike lanes during the two-year campaign period."

Cities must apply to be considered, and Roskowski says that she always wants one surprising city in the mix: hence, Memphis.

"Bike lanes are an economic development opportunity for cities who want to be competitive. We can't fit any more cars into cities. We can have more people, but not cars. We need to figure out how to move them without cars," Roskowski said.

The project keyword is "protected." The perception of safety is very important. Roskowski said that 75 percent of people are concerned for their safety while biking on city

streets. Eighty-six percent say they will not ride in unprotected bike lanes, but when they were shown a photo of a protected bike lane (with plastic posts), 90 percent of people would ride in it, and the number climbs to 95 percent if the bike lane had a curb.

In the first year of the project, the number of protected bike lanes in cities went from 62 to 102 and the number is expected to double again to over 200 during the next project.

The first Green Lanes project cycle is wrapping up at the end of 2013, with a new project kicking off in 2014. Learn more at [People for Bikes](#).

[[image credit: Phillip Barron: Flickr cc](#)]



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Andrea Newell has more than ten years of experience designing, developing and writing ERP e-learning materials for large corporations in several industries. She was a consultant for PricewaterhouseCoopers and a contract consultant for companies like IBM, BP, Marathon Oil, Pfizer, and Steelcase, among others. She is a writer and former editor at TriplePundit and a social media blog fellow at The Story of Stuff Project. She has contributed to In Good Company (Vault's CSR blog), Evolved Employer, The Glass Hammer, EcoLocalizer and CSRwire. She is a volunteer at the West Michigan Environmental Action Council and lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan. You can reach her at [andrea.g.newell@gmail.com](mailto:andrea.g.newell@gmail.com) and [@anewell3p](#) on Twitter.

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