

## BICYCLE-FRIENDLY NEWTON?

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Traffic is a huge problem in Newton. It challenges public safety, ties up valuable time, adds to our consumption of fossil fuels, creates demands for more parking, pollutes the air, creates noise and degrades our quality of life. Sitting in a car, when we could be doing something that involves moving our bodies, is neither healthy nor good for the waistline. Traffic even creates a new twist on violent behavior: road rage.

Good public transportation systems reduce automobile congestion, but it takes years and lots of money to build those systems. One proven approach to the traffic problem that does not require large expenditures is to make bicycling easy and convenient. It's not a panacea, but bicycles can have a big impact.

Recently, the city of Paris cut traffic, reduced pollution, improved parking and became greener, quieter and more laid back by providing 20,600 rental bikes at 1,450 stations throughout the city—about one station every 250 yards. It's a win-win situation for everyone. This public-private partnership is expected to provide 91 million trips in the first year alone. And it is creating significant revenue for the city.

Almost overnight, navigating the City of Light by bicycle has become a piece of gateau. Any adult can quickly access a bike with the swipe of a card, and drop it off at any docking station. It's cheap; actually, it's free for the first thirty minutes. All over the city you see commuters, tourists, and everyone else, sometimes dressed to the nines, exercising pedal power. And enjoying themselves! There have been few complaints, and only minor glitches.

Two years ago, Lyon, France implemented a similar bicycle rental program, and it transformed that city; now you see more people in the landscape, and fewer cars. In one year, Lyon saved 3,000 tons of carbon dioxide from being emitted into the air, bicycle use tripled, and vehicular traffic was reduced 4 percent.

Community-use bicycle programs have been tried in other places at other times, with varying degrees of success. The Parisian program started with a commitment by the mayor to reduce vehicular traffic by 40 percent in 20 years. Within a few years, separate bus lanes were created, which are shared with taxis and bicycles, and during rush hours cars were confined to fewer lanes than before. Traffic began to flow more easily. Now bicycling is much safer, perhaps in part because bus drivers and taxi drivers have been trained to look out for and accommodate to bicyclists.

Bicycles are playing a bigger role in the transportation equation in large and small cities all over the world. One day each week one million of the eight million residents of Bogota take to the main avenue on bicycles. Bicycle commuting is big in Cape Town. And people use bicycles for routine errands and food shopping in many European cities, and in Kyoto, and in a great many college towns in the US.

On a recent two-day visit to London, we saw many hundreds of bicycle commuters. Indeed, many more people are braving the streets of Newton on bicycles than ever

before (although I can personally vouch only for the last 65 years). Bicycles can be ridden by young and old alike, they sometimes have more than two wheels, and they can be adapted for people with disabilities or for carrying large loads. In developing countries, bicycles are commonly used for commerce. It is possible to stay relatively dry in the rain and comfortable in cold weather while riding a bike.

“Sturdy” bicycles are surely too slow, you might say. A recent study in Paris compared the duration of trips within the city by car, bicycle, taxi and walking; the bicycle riders consistently arrived most quickly.

So what are we waiting for? Bicycling is a healthy form of local transportation available to all. It is cheap, fast, convenient, and it contributes to a cleaner, more serene and sustainable environment. Newton is not Paris, but it is our city. Let's make it more bicycle-friendly.