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Green light at the end of the bicycle path

By Tom Watson
Special to The Seattle Times

These days, more folks bike to work in Seattle, and some of them ride downtown on Yesler Way. When they pass over Interstate 5 on Yesler, they look down on 15 lanes of traffic, including the on- and offramps. Those lanes are often full of cars.

That 15-lane swath of pavement through the heart of the city reminds us that cars still rule, even here in green Seattle. Those cars also fill the surface streets, where they compete with cyclists.

But there may be light at the end of the bike path. As the ultimate green and healthy consumer activity, biking is worth fighting for, and it's gaining friends in high places.

Q: Why does biking matter?

A: If cycling truly becomes a mainstream transportation option here — which it has been for years in many international cities — the impact in reducing global warming and air pollution could be enormous. Vehicle emissions account for about 60 percent of all greenhouse gases in the Seattle area. Biking can also save you big bucks, since the average American spends more than \$8,000 a year to own and operate a car. And the health benefits from cycling are off the charts.

Q: So why don't lots more people ride bikes to work, or for short trips?

A: The biggest reason is fear. Many riders don't feel safe sharing the road with cars, especially during rush hour. In Europe, numerous cities boast networks of bikeways separated from cars by curbs or fences. If we had more of those here, the numbers of bike commuters would skyrocket. In a fairly densely developed city like Seattle, however, it's difficult to add dedicated bikeways.

Q: But haven't local governments been making the region more bike-friendly?

A: Yes. The city of Seattle has spent more than \$6 million the past two years on Bicycle Master Plan improvements, (www.seattle.gov/Transportation/bikemaster.htm) making road upgrades for bike safety, adding bicycle racks and extending bike routes, lanes and trails. King County and its Metro Transit system have also undertaken innovative projects to support biking (<http://metro.kingcounty.gov/tops/bike/bike.html>).

Q: What's happening nationally and regionally?

A: Under President Obama, the federal government takes biking seriously as a green strategy. Through the economic-stimulus plan and other programs, the feds will likely provide several billion dollars for biking-related projects around the nation.

For convenience, comfort and safety, cyclists can choose from a bounty of new equipment options. These products include super-lightweight, folding or chainless bicycles, plus much-improved lights, helmets and rain gear.

Advocacy organizations such as Cascade Bicycle Club (www.cascade.org) and the Bicycle Alliance of Washington (www.bicyclealliance.org) are unsung heroes in the regional biking boom. They provide practical resources for riders and put pressure on governments to do more.

In the Portland area, biking has practically become a religion, and the pervasiveness of cycling culture there has had a healthy,

competitive influence on the Puget Sound region.

Q: What about bike-sharing programs?

A: Bike-sharing — where you can check out a bike with a credit card at a kiosk, and return it at another kiosk — flourishes in Europe. The Vélib' system in Paris includes more than 20,000 bikes at 1,450 stations, and last week expanded to the Paris suburbs. In the U.S., a small bike-sharing system operates in Washington, D.C., while Denver and Minneapolis are soon expected to introduce modest programs.

Geared toward casual riders and visitors, bike-sharing can play a major role in reducing car trips and raising cycling's visibility. In America, bike-sharing is a harder sell than in Europe because of helmet laws in many states and cities, including Seattle. But sooner or later a U.S. city will figure out how. It might even happen here.

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