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EcoConsumer

Hunt for broader market puts new spin on bicycle

Over the past 50 years, the bicycle has ridden quite a trajectory: From just for kids, to recreation mainstay for adults, to commuter vehicle, to potential full-time car replacement.

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times



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This simple human-powered machine has climbed real and metaphorical hills to prove its essential value to the environment, health and transportation, especially here in the Northwest. Now the bicycle faces another steep challenge as it attempts to broaden its appeal even further.

Q: New iterations of the bicycle such as electric bikes and folding bikes have already become commonplace on Seattle's streets. Is there anything else new on two wheels?

A: Dozens of fresh spins on the bicycle have been introduced to consumers the past few years, from futuristic to practical, and that's really the big story in the cycling world in the 21st century. These breakthroughs could greatly expand the universe of bike riders, but it's hard to predict which innovations will catch on and which will stay on the fringe.

One of the most intriguing and practical examples is the cargo bike. With the price of gas skyrocketing and more of us living in densely populated areas, making a run to the supermarket or hardware store on a bike increasingly makes sense. Cargo-bike options include the Dutch "bakfiets" bike, which has a wooden box in the front, and the "longtail" with a carrying rack in the back.

Q: Are cargo bikes really practical in Seattle?

A: They may be a stretch if you live on a steep hill, but for many people cargo bikes can save

money and provide great exercise. Choose a type of cargo bike based on your terrain and typical hauling needs. For examples of the dozens of cargo-bike styles available, including electric-assist models and three-wheeled cargo trikes, visit rideyourbike.com/cargo.html or cargocycling.org.

Storing your cargo bike might be an issue for city-dwellers, since they can take up a lot of room. If you don't have adequate storage space, or if you wouldn't use a cargo bike often enough to justify the cost, consider getting one of the spiffy new-generation bike trailers for your existing bike instead.

Q: If a cargo bike takes the place of a car, they must be expensive, right?

A: Most cargo bikes cost more than \$1,000, and a heavy-duty or custom-built cargo bike will run three or four times that. A sturdy bike trailer for cargo usually goes for \$200 to \$400. Keep in mind that an average American spends more than \$8,500 a year to own and operate a car.

Q: I don't want a cargo bike, and I'm actually not a big fan of bicycles in general. Is there anything out there for me?

A: Some new cycling innovations attempt to reinvent the basics. For example, if the ubiquitous greasy bike chain and the possibility of getting your pant leg caught in it deter you from bike commuting, consider the new chainless bikes. There are two main types of chainless bikes, belt-drive and shaft-drive, and each could be a good choice for someone looking for less maintenance.

Another radical approach to cycling, the recumbent bicycle, has been around for years but is gaining momentum. More than 200 models of recumbent bikes and trikes are now on the market. A recumbent bike, where you sit down low like you're in a lounge chair, is a good fit for some riders who have back pain or other problems on a regular bike.

Both chainless and recumbent bikes cost more than standard bikes. More information on these and other alternative bicycles can be found at bicycleuniverse.info/eqp.

Q: With all these great options, why don't more people ride bikes?

A: We still live in a car culture, although in Seattle and Portland that's gradually changing. But when you consider that 40 percent of all car trips are less than three miles, and you factor in the environmental and financial costs of driving, it seems insane that we don't make more trips on two wheels.

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