Curing Car Vs. Cyclist Road Wars With A New Rule: "Just Don't Steal The Right-Of-Way"

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Treehugger: Curing Car Vs. Cyclist Road Wars With A New Rule: "Just Don't Steal The Right-Of-Way"
by A.K. Streeter, Portland, Oregon on 08.18.11
CARS & TRANSPORTATION (bikes)

Though a world-class cycling city, Portland lacks a bike share system similar to those in other great cycling cities such as Minneapolis, Montreal, Paris, Barcelona. Though bike sharing is considered to be important to attract new cyclists onto the lanes, lack of funds has hampered planning efforts. At first, 2011 seemed to be the year the city of Portland would fund bike sharing. But then, as a vote neared, opposition arose from Commissioner Amanda Fritz, who claimed she couldn't support funding bike sharing due to...bad bicyclist behavior.

> *"I may support a bike sharing program downtown when I see bike riders using downtown streets and sidewalks in a safe manner. Daily, I see cyclists in the Light rail and bus lanes in front of my office. I see cyclists riding on the sidewalks, endangering and harassing pedestrians. I see cyclists running red lights and making illegal turns off the bus mall. And these are presumably experienced cyclists. I believe a bike rental program downtown would only add to these unsafe behaviors." - Amanda Fritz, via Bike Portland*

Though the idea of withholding funding to a system until all users agree to strictly follow the rules is a new line of logic (imagine canceling road improvements until car drivers were caught speeding), bashing scofflaw cyclists, or course, isn't unique to Portland or Commissioner Fritz.

In fact, holding cyclists to a "different standard" is rampant, says bicycle attorney **Bob Mionske**, author of the book Bicycling and the Law.

"It is hypocritical, but cyclists are held to a different standard," Mionske said. "Meanwhile, 7 out of 10 motorists admit to breaking the law."

Of course, cyclists also break the law. As reported in the New York Times, students of Hunter college did two separate on-street studies of bicyclist

behavior. In their most recent 2009 survey, they found that cyclists "routinely" (37%) rode through red lights. Around 10 percent of the more than 5,000 cyclists observed rode against traffic.

And while on the subject of lawbreaking, a PEMCO poll found that about a third of drivers admitted to jaywalking when they are pedestrians.

But because urban cycling is on the upswing in a selected number of U.S. cities, the question is whether scofflaw behavior is deepening the so-called rift between motorists, bicyclists, and pedestrians.

A recent Marist poll in New York City, where bike lane installations have caused protests, doesn't have a complete answer but some interesting tidbits.

First off, in spite of the much publicized bike lane conflict, the poll found a majority of New Yorkers - 66% of adults - support the bike lanes.

The poll also asked respondents which groups were "mostly respectful or not respectful when sharing the roads"? Those polled considered taxi drivers to be the least respectful (78% not respectful); motorists were next (53% not respectful), followed by bicyclists (46% not respectful) and pedestrians last (44% not respectful).

These are both encouraging and discouraging figures. On the one hand, they demonstrate that those on bikes are neither much better nor much worse than others when it comes to showing respect to fellow road users.

On the other hand, it seems like overall civility in traffic is a fairly scarce commodity.

How to improve? Well, Bob Mionske said there's only one golden rule consisting of just six words, and it applies equally to motorists, cyclists, and pedestrians.

"Don't steal the right of way." - Bob Mionske, BicycleLaw.com

P.S. Though Commissioner Fritz voted "no" on the initiative to fund Portland bike sharing, it was passed yesterday - see BikePortland.org for details.