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Utility Cycling in Michigan

We've all seen them; wearing bright clown colors and spandex so tight that not much is left to our imaginations, acting like they own the roads. They are blight on our otherwise perfect streets. They are cyclists and we know they are nuisances. In reality, cyclists come in all different shapes and sizes, wearing anything from specialty clothing to jeans and a t-shirt. Many even take cycling further than for mere recreation. These utility cyclists use bicycles as transportation. They travel from one place to another, commuting to work or school, shopping, or just barhopping. Utility cycling is popular in most of the world and has a small, but growing, establishment in the U.S. Michigan, however, falls behind with the utility cycling trend. Because utility cycling is a viable alternative to driving, since it is personally and environmentally beneficial, and because the state is working hard towards cycling infrastructure, more Michiganders should take up utility cycling.

Jamie Smith is a Michigan cycling icon. He's written a very popular cycling book and has been racing and riding in Michigan for several decades. His riding is almost exclusively recreational, though. When I asked him about why he doesn't utility cycle, his answer was consistent with how many Michiganders feel. "The retail centers around me are not really 'friendly' to bikes. There is usually no device to lock the bike to and theft is a concern." (Smith interview.)

Michigan, however, can boast of a unique cycling town on Mackinac Island. This special place has banned motorized vehicles and relies on bicycles to help people cover the eight mile highway that encircles the island. As Smith says, "Nearly everyone visits this place and

witnesses a lot of utility bikes carting luggage and material around, yet they don't bring that idea home with them." Mackinac Island shows that utility cycling can be a viable alternative to cars.

The U.S. Department of Transportation shows "that half of all trips in the United States are 3 miles or less in length, a distance widely regarded as bikable for most adults." (Gardner) According to the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration, in 2009, 589 people died in passenger vehicle accidents on Michigan roads with 1239 drivers involved in those accidents. For the trips that are 3 miles or less, utility cycling could cut Michigan's roadway fatalities. But there are also other benefits. "Regular cyclists... take less time off work from illness and stress. They have been found to be more energetic and productive when they get to work. Regular cyclists enjoy better sleep." (British Cycling)

A non-profit, Ghana Bikes, is involved in helping the people of Ghana see some of the personal benefits of utility cycling. "In Africa, a bicycle can make all the difference... People with bikes get to schools, markets, farms and health care in one-fourth the time, improving their lives and economic futures." (ghanabikes.org) While Ghana may seem a world away; the benefits of utility cycling are much the same as in Michigan. Utility cycling can be a worthwhile endeavor for all Michiganders.

The environmental aspects of utility cycling are not minimal, either. Gardner says, "In operation, American cars emit nearly a pound of CO₂ per mile driven... while a bicycle, of course, emits nothing." In shape utility cyclists can comfortably ride at twelve miles per hour while out of shape riders can comfortably ride at eight miles per hour. This means that a three-mile long shopping trip can take between 10 and 20 minutes. With traffic and parking, driving can oftentimes take just as long! When looking at the environmental cost, driving hardly

seems worth it.

Even large companies see the environmental benefits of cycling. While the options of small, gas-powered vehicles abound, many companies choose utility cycles to ease their workers' jobs. In a large, enclosed building, one may need to travel from one side to another quickly but gas fumes from motorized vehicles would be trapped. For this reason, Workman Cycles produce utility bikes. "These are bicycles and tricycles that are used to move personnel at large facilities. Workers need a good way to get around." (NPR) Even their founder saw the benefits of utility bikes in 1898. "Our goal is to bring a more efficient, reliable and healthful transportation to modern industry." (NPR) Utility cycling has shown, for more than 100 years, to be the best choice in transportation for many companies and individuals.

One cannot talk about utility cycling without bringing up the roads themselves. Many times, Michigan cyclists are forced to choose between sidewalks (which are not made for cycling) and riding in the lane with drivers who may not be looking out for a bicycle rider. The opportunity to get run over by a speeding motorist is not one most people take. For this reason, many would-be utility cyclists choose cars over bikes. This problem, though, has been known for many years and is currently being addressed. "But a closer look reveals that the fault line between cycling and noncycling countries or cities is created... by transportation policies." (Gardner)

Michigan is starting to address this problem with a vengeance. "Ensuring that roads provide safe mobility for all travelers, not just motor vehicles, is at the heart of a new approach to envisioning and building surface transportation facilities known as 'complete streets'." (Robin Smith, etc.) The complete streets initiative has just been adopted as Michigan's new road policy.

This policy will allow utility cyclists to ride more safely than they are currently used to. "As stated by Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, '... It turns out that a complete streets approach offers the perfect intersection of my twin guideposts: safety and livable communities.'" (Robin Smith, etc.) This policy is not new to the U.S. For the last 10 years, Bicycling Magazine has put out a list of the best places in the U.S. to cycle. "While other places are trying to get a few stripes painted on the roads, Portland (Oregon) is optimizing bike routes... Each year, \$100,000 is spent... connecting the bike network in places that were too difficult to implement when a project was installed." (Cote) Portland is frequently on or near the top of the list of best places to cycle and with a large percentage of people taking to bikes; it is a model of cycling infrastructure. Although Michigan is years away from Portland, the adoption of the complete streets initiative will move Michigan forward and allow those who are too timid to currently ride a chance to change their habits in the future.

Of course, the attitudes of other cyclists can also hinder new riders from taking up utility cycling. "Yet the urbane cyclists pushing these changes may be their own worst marketing problem. Bike culture is just too cool and clubby for its own good." (Gutierrez) Many cyclists pushing for more cyclists are beginning to realize that being on the outside of the mainstream may not be a good idea. Even Portland pales in ridership numbers to the likes of some European communities. Amsterdam, The Netherlands claims nearly 50% of its population as utility cyclists. Cyclists in Amsterdam do not have the same "counter-culture" labels attached as those in the U.S. Part of this is because the infrastructure in Amsterdam is some of the best in the world but also because cycling is presented as something that anyone can and should do, from the very young to the very old. In the U.S., in contrast, "The emphasis has always been on bikes

that sell: road, BMX, and mountain bikes, as opposed to bikes that DO stuff." (Jamie Smith)

While utility cycling is in its infancy in Michigan, it may be "counter-culture," but those who cycle for transportation are the same people on and off their bikes. While utility cyclists may be seen as "generally a crank, either profoundly antisocial or hopelessly narcissistic and following the strenuous life in hopes of achieving immortality or a legendary sex life," (Gutierrez) most are normal people who have concluded that utility cycling fits into their lives. As more people begin to use the new infrastructure being planned, cycling will look less "hipster" and more normal.

"A simple machine invented almost 100 years ago can at once liberate congested cities, restore independence, promote good health, engender social responsibility, and even help repair the fragile net of social cohesion." (British Cycling) While these may seem like lofty ideals, utility cycling can and has done many of these things for both the individual cyclist and the society. While the Michigan government continues to set goals to look toward future transportation needs and choices of its citizens, Michiganders themselves are beginning to realize that utility cycling can be a better choice than driving, both personally and environmentally. Michigan still has a long way to go to ensure the safety of every rider, but it has taken a major step and continues to improve the infrastructure necessary. To improve our health and environment, we should all utility cycle a little more.

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