



Can Long Beach Prove that Bikes Are Good for Business?

Mark Hertsgaard January 11, 2012

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Look out, Minneapolis and Portland. Long Beach is making its move, aiming to surpass you as America's Most Bike Friendly City. Does that sound odd for a city whose chief claim to environmental fame has been its massively polluting port and offshore oil facilities—not to mention a city that, like the rest of Southern California, has long been in thrall of the car?



Well, all that's changing, and the change is coming from the top. Long Beach Mayor Bob Foster, who says he tries to bike 100 miles a week, actually laughs about the car addiction of his mega neighbor to the north. "I love that scene in *L.A. Story* where Steve Martin gets behind the wheel, backs out of his driveway, and drives to his neighbor's driveway," Foster says. "He won't even walk as far as his neighbor's house!"

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Mark Hertsgaard (markhertsgaard.com), a fellow of New America Foundation, is The Nation's environment correspondent. He...

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Of course, there are still plenty of cars in Long Beach (though Foster himself drives an electric one), but bicycles are getting more respect, not to mention resources, than ever before. With help from state and federal grants and pressure from local cycling enthusiasts, the city government has installed 130 miles of bike trails, established protected bike lanes (that is, lanes separated from vehicular traffic by physical barriers) on major commuter thoroughfares, created bike boulevards that enable kids and parents to bike or walk safely to and from school, and installed fifty new bike racks.

Perhaps most innovative has been the city's effort to establish bike-friendly shopping districts—the first in the country, officials say—engaging local merchants by showing them how, contrary to common belief, biking can actually bring more customers and vitality to shopping districts.

"The math is pretty simple," says April Economides, the principal of Green Octopus Consulting and the leader of the city's outreach to local businesses. "You can park twelve bikes in the amount of space it takes to park one car. And someone who shifts from owning a car to a bicycle tends to have more discretionary income, because, for a commuter, the typical cost of a bicycle is \$300 a year, compared to \$7,000 a year for a car."

Economides, a vivacious 36-year-old whose family owns one of the best-known restaurants in town, describes herself as a "social change agent" who leverages the power of small business. "At first, most merchants didn't think about bikes or even had a negative view of them," she says. "My job was to educate them about how biking can put more money in their pockets."

Kerstin Kansteiner, whose Berlin coffee shop is a member of the East Village Arts Bike-Friendly Business District, confirms the point. "I see it every day," she says. "The bike racks outside our shop increase our visibility and bring us more customers. People on bikes stop at places they haven't visited before because they don't have to try to find parking."

Lauren Lilly, the 28-year-old co-owner of Yellow 108, a sustainable clothing business that sells its hats and sunglasses in Whole Foods and other retailers nationwide, says the company moved to Long Beach from LA last year "because we saw Long Beach as an up

and coming area, and it's a lot less expensive." Her showroom is located on one of Long Beach's bike boulevards. "We saw lots of bike commuters going by and that's our core demographic: working professionals who want to live a healthy, planet-friendly lifestyle."

In the Belmont Shore neighborhood, a green sharrows lane extends for a mile through an upscale shopping district. The lane is not physically separated from vehicular traffic, but it feels almost as safe to a bicyclist. "Putting green paint down is a sign that the city authority says that bikes belong here," says Charlie Gandy, a consultant to the city government. "In Southern California it's assumed that bikes don't belong, but this sends a different message. That's also important for the larger public education campaign around the role of bikes in our community."

Local officials concede that making Long Beach the most bike-friendly city in America is still more an aspiration than a reality. Still, boosting cycling reinforces a new narrative for Long Beach, says Allan Crawford, the bicycle coordinator in the city's Department of Public Works. "Long Beach has always been seen as the poor step-child to L.A., but now we're re-creating our image," he says. "We're saying, especially to young people, Long Beach is a lot cheaper than LA, and it's not sterile like Orange County [Long Beach's neighbor to the south]. It's easy to get around here, we encourage a car-light lifestyle, it's still a great beach town, and there's all these hip places to enjoy, too."

Not everyone is pleased, of course. A taxi driver named Kenny says bike lanes only reduce parking spots and slow traffic flow, especially because cyclists are "lackadaisical"—by which he seems to mean they don't pedal as fast as cars want to travel.

Mayor Foster says there is an element of truth to such complaints, but only a tiny one. "Parking is always an issue," he says. "But I drive [the commuter thoroughfares of] Third Street and Broadway every day, and I don't wait any longer for [traffic] light changes than I did before."

Then he quotes an ancient philosopher: "I like a line by Aristotle, 'Beware the barrenness of a busy life,'" Foster says. "Sometimes I can't remember at the end of a day what I did the past eight hours. That's moving too fast. A bit slower pace in life is a good thing."

Mark Hertsgaard *January 11, 2012*


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