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Title: Transportation planners show road to success

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What do traffic congestion, the nation's overweight epidemic and high fuel prices have in common? The issues can all be addressed by better urban planning for bicycles and pedestrians, transportation planners increasingly say. "Every city is grappling with health issues, congestion and safety, and lifestyle issues," said Mia Birk, owner of Alta Planning + Design, a Portland-based consulting firm that aids bicycle and pedestrian planning. "It's a convergence of so many forces leading to the point where we have to look seriously at the way our cities are laid out."

Biking and walking provide healthy, low-cost and pollution-free alternatives to commuting in cities crowded by motor vehicles. The problem is that most American cities are still being designed for cars in ways that are unsafe or inconvenient for cyclists and pedestrians.

"The suburbs are just hell for cyclists," with streets that don't connect, six-lane thoroughfares and gated communities, said P.M. Summer, transportation alternatives coordinator for the city of Dallas, Texas.

"Transportation planners need to begin to be less automobile-centric nationwide," Summer said.

Current planners, both Birk and Summer say, must be re-educated, and a new generation of transportation planners is needed to better incorporate cyclists and pedestrians into the urban streetscape.

With this goal in mind, Portland State University professors are proposing the creation of a Bicycle and Pedestrian Institute to be housed within the university's Nohad A. Toulan School of Urban Studies and Planning.

The institute would be the first program on the West Coast focused on integrating bicycle and pedestrian considerations into transportation planning.

The program would create a center for research and education in partnership with the city of Portland, the University of Oregon, the Bicycle Transportation Alliance and the Willamette Pedestrian Coalition.

Portland is an ideal location for the institute because of its strong bicycling community and progressive land-use planning, said planners involved in developing the institute.

"We're already seeing a surge in the use of bicycles and pedestrians for accomplishing everyday activities in the Portland region," said Ethan Seltzer, director of the College of Urban and Public Affairs at PSU. "We want to better understand that so we can plan better" for bicycle and pedestrian use.

A growing awareness

Bicycle and pedestrian transportation planning is a "burgeoning field," said Birk, whose firm's 30 planners are "constantly" in demand in cities across the country.

And bicycle and pedestrian needs have increasingly been incorporated into urban transportation planning since the federal Clean Air Act of 1970.

Pedestrian and bike planning received a further boost in 1990, when the first major federal highway bill to allocate funding for non-motorized infrastructure was passed. Spending in that segment increased with each of four re-authorizations since then, in turn raising awareness in communities that receive project funding for bicycle and pedestrian improvements.

Transportation planners have also developed, through trial and error, several design philosophies for integrating bicycles and pedestrians into a system designed for cars.

But while advances have been made, numerous cities still haven't put pro-bicycle and pedestrian ideas into practice.

"The design guides that are out there, developed over the last 25 years, are very good," Summer said. "The trick is making sure that they're applied."

The Federal Highway Administration has developed a university-level curriculum to encourage schools to integrate bicycle and pedestrian transportation into their programs.

Still, Birk said, very few universities offer courses devoted to pedestrian and bicycle planning.

Nationwide, "there is a lot of training for practitioners on how to incorporate bike and ped issues into their transportation plans," said Marya Morris, a senior research associate in Chicago with the American Planning Association. "But it's done by nonprofit organizations and private advocacy groups.

"The center (PSU) is developing is going to be great because the center will kind of formalize that and become the place to go for information," Morris said.

The institute would supplement PSU's current urban planning program by offering graduate students a bike and pedestrian certificate for their coursework. The institute would also offer continuing education classes for professionals already in the field.

Research at the school would be centered on a number of federal and local projects, such as extended bikeways and new types of traffic markings, to help city and state agencies evaluate the effectiveness of bicycle and pedestrian programs.

"Forever, advocacy groups have been trying to chip away at the dominance of the highway building industry on funding for transportation," Morris said. "Having a center that's devoted to non-motorized modes is important because it affirms the significance of the movement in the direction of giving people options other than driving."

Up and running

A new report by the Portland Department of Transportation could give legs - or wheels - to a proposed Bicycle and Pedestrian Institute at Portland State University.

Bicycle-related manufacturing, recreation, retail and professional services bring \$63 million in economic activity and an estimated 600 to 800 jobs to the region, according to the study.

The cycling industry's impact on the economy is small in comparison to the region's total employment of over 1 million jobs, according to the Oregon Employment Department.

But "every little bit helps," said Tim Duy, a University of Oregon economist.

The study helps quantify the impact of Portland's investment in bicycling infrastructure over the last 10 years and points to a growing business sector that contributes to the city's economic health and quality of life.

"This kind of aggressive look at the bicycle-related industry and how to recruit (businesses) to Portland will be very helpful for the institute," said Linda Ginenthal, transportation webmaster with the city of Portland and an author of the study. "When someone is going to start a business (or school) here, they want good hard numbers to back it up."

The creation of a Bicycle and Pedestrian Institute, in turn, could help spur further industry growth as well as cement Portland's reputation as a national leader in cycling-related business, Ginenthal said.

The city of Portland has allocated \$3.5 million in capital expenditures for bike projects in the next three years. The proposed institute would work with the city to quantify the results of that investment "in a scientifically significant way," Ginenthal said.

"Here's a growing sector. We need to really examine what can the (Portland Development Commission) do to bring new businesses here," Ginenthal said. "So it's really the start of a conversation."

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