Opinion: How to get more people riding the bikes we love

by Russell Hancock and Shiloh Ballard | The Mercury News | March 27, 2017

Do you remember learning to ride a bike? Most people do. It is a milestone memory, connected to all sorts of positive emotions. A sense of accomplishment is the primary feeling, quickly followed by joy, freedom and a sense of adventure associated with being able to transport oneself, “all by myself!”

The Mercury News’ Scott Herhold pondered this question in his recent column (March 22), spurred by the release of “Silicon Valley Bike Vision,” a report from our two organizations, Joint Venture Silicon Valley and Silicon Valley Bicycle Coalition.

This report is an important step in the bike advocacy world — a world that has historically worked for roadway improvement projects based on anecdotal evidence. Following on the heels of collision data collected by the Public Health Departments of San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties, these reports will better inform decisions about where and how to spend taxpayer dollars to improve our transportation infrastructure for all users.

The report underscores two points that we’ve known to be true in the bike world. First, there is a clear relationship between better bike lanes, fewer collisions and increased ridership. Building bike lanes means people feel safer, and as a result, they ride more.

Even more important is that the type of bike lane matters. Skinny painted white lines separating high speed traffic from the committed bicyclist are now viewed as inadequate.

To improve safety and as a result, ridership, local governments are implementing high quality bike paths in the form of buffered bike lanes and protected bike lanes, in addition to green paint that clearly shows roadway users where each should be.

These new treatments will take time for people to get used to, but they are the types of bike facilities that make the roads feel safe for the family that rides to run errands.

This leads to the second point of the report. It is wonderful that we are now designing streets for all users and that high quality bike lanes and wide sidewalks are embedded in transportation planning. However, all too often a prize winning bike lane abruptly stops. This is particularly difficult to remedy across city jurisdictions.

Fortunately, some cities are working together to address cross jurisdictional gaps. Mountain View, Palo Alto, Redwood City and Menlo Park have banded together to plan and fund projects that span their city borders.

These conversations also give us the opportunity to collectively change gears when it comes to transportation planning.

Imagine if improving mental health, reducing our 30 percent obesity rate, increasing workplace productivity and ensuring that people were able to transport themselves in a way that resulted in a smile was the goal of every single transportation engineer. We hope this report encourages that thinking.

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