Guest Opinion: With ideal climate and landscape, why aren't we biking?

Four cities are working together to create a Peninsula bike corridor in a first-of-its-kind project

by Russell Hancock  |  Palo Alto Weekly  |  May 26, 2017

Palo Alto, Mountain View, Menlo Park and Redwood City have joined together to form the Managers Mobility Partnership. Representatives from each city have agreed to form a bike corridor connecting all four cities should be suitable for riders of all ages. Weekly file photo.

One of the reasons I love life in Palo Alto is because our city has made a serious commitment to bicycle infrastructure. Among Silicon Valley cities, we have been out front, and it has been this way for decades.

Wouldn't it be great if this were the case throughout the region? Shouldn't it be possible to bike easily from city to city? Shouldn't the bicycle be the dominant mode of travel for local trips?

In Amsterdam, 38 percent of the people list bicycling as their most frequent mode of transportation on a typical day. In Copenhagen, ranked by some as the most bike-friendly city in the world, 36 percent of all citizens commute by bicycle to work, school or university.

In greater Silicon Valley the bike-commute rate is a mere 1.7 percent, and that just doesn't make sense. We have a Mediterranean climate, a flat landscape, we're a health-conscious population, and we're rabidly committed to the environment. So why aren't we biking?

The reason, it seems, is that we haven't provided continuous, seamless infrastructure or addressed all those impossible intersections and freeway crossings where the cyclists feels unsafe.

But I'm proud to say we're working to change that. For starters, four Peninsula cities — Palo Alto, Redwood City, Menlo Park and Mountain View — have launched an unprecedented exploratory process to develop a high-quality, safe, north-south bicycle corridor linking those communities from end to end.

All four city councils have adopted an identical resolution kicking off a collaborative process on the interconnected route. The four cities and their managers are members of the Managers Mobility Partnership facilitated by the organization I lead, Joint Venture Silicon Valley.

Increasing the number of bicycle commuters is a shared goal of the four cities in the partnership, which also includes Stanford University.

For the Peninsula bike corridor, the first such joint project of its kind, each city will engage in its own community outreach and coordinate closely with the partnership cities to articulate the route for the dedicated corridor.
The community engagement and planning process will be inclusive and lengthy. Funds for the project are not yet identified. In the intervening time, existing north-south bike lanes will be examined and enhanced with signage, surface improvements and other upgrades where the network is discontinuous.

All cities in the Managers Mobility Partnership have agreed the bike corridor should be suitable for riders of all ages, serve as an artery linking the partner cities, be identified by suitable signage and provide access to downtown areas, job centers and other intense land uses.

At the same time, Joint Venture and Silicon Valley Bicycle Coalition have just published "Silicon Valley BikeVision," the first report of its kind to lay out a plan for our region to become one of America's great biking capitals. The report — and the vision it lays out — also has the backing of big-league companies like Google and Facebook.

The study details the health, environmental, economic, safety and social equity benefits of bicycling with extensive data for each category and highlights visionary programs in such cities as Eugene, Boulder, Minneapolis and Salt Lake City, along with Davis.

It further presents the current state of biking in Silicon Valley — where bikeways are located, who bikes to work, how bike commuting has changed and bike-safety improvements.

Finally, the report shows the existing gaps and network barriers and how to design better freeway, railway and arterial crossings in the future.

Over the long run, we plan to identify resources and spearhead a regionwide initiative to make the Silicon Valley Bike Vision a reality. It will happen only if we work in new and innovative partnership with cities up and down the Peninsula and across Silicon Valley.

We recognize it is going to take time, money and a lot of political will to make the same progress as those European capitals that started to prioritize bicycling decades ago. But that means we need to be working feverishly now, so that we can enjoy the benefits in our lifetime and that of our kids.

Join the effort! Read the report, sign on to the vision and let your representatives know this matters to you personally.

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