

Biking in Bethlehem: be safe, have fun (24)

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(24th in a series of posts on Walkability and Bikeability)

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Gadfly:

I'm one of those people you see riding a bicycle on the streets of Bethlehem. I've been doing it for years, and in addition to walking, my bike is my primary form of getting around town. I'm interested to read the thoughts of Kate McVey on the mysteries of sharrows in Bethlehem. Those shared lane markings, or sharrows, show where cyclists should safely ride and have the side benefit of letting the car drivers know that bikes belong on the streets.

I must admit, though, I get nervous when I hear people talking about installing bike lanes in Bethlehem. Bike lanes are not a magic bullet; unless we are willing to give up lots of on-street parking to install protected bike lanes — steps which I do not see us having the political will to do now, though I'm willing to continue working in that direction — cyclists have to be comfortable sharing the roads with cars. Slapping down some paint on a road side and calling it a bike lane gives the least experienced cyclists a dangerously false sense of security, increases the likelihood of car/bike conflicts, and encourages vehicle drivers to shout at cyclists all the more to get off “their” roads.

With a view to encouraging cycling in Bethlehem as conditions exist currently, I offer the following observations:

1. CYCLING LOOKS SCARIER THAN IT IS

Our roads are plenty wide enough for both bicyclists and drivers. For example, our main east-west thoroughfare, Broad Street, used to have a trolley line running down the middle and now, even with on street parking on both sides, there's plenty of room for a bicyclist riding visibly and faster moving traffic passing. If you don't like the bigger streets, take the less traveled — Market Street does have more stop signs and signals, but as a result the car traffic moves much more slowly.

Often, when I get to where I'm going, and someone sees me locking my bike or carrying my bike helmet, I will get exclaimed at as if I just walked across Niagara Falls on a tightrope. "I could never ride with all those cars and trucks on the road!" I could point out that a cyclist travels through town an average of 8-12 MPH, so if I had a conflict with another vehicle, I am safer than if I was tripping through the streets in a vehicle at 30-40 MPH, even with all that metal and glass surrounding me.

I've come to understand such exclamations are much more about that person's anxiety than about cycling being in any way significant or special. Not to be macabre, but I suspect we might have a more realistic perception of the relative dangers of any kind of travel If we marked every spot where a motorist died or was severely injured in an accident, as we mark where an unfortunate cyclist meets his or her end.

To me, at the end of the day, traveling by bike is mostly mundane. Enjoyably so, but cycling a mile or so to the library or the coffee shop is just not that big a deal.

2. SAFE RIDING IS VISIBLE RIDING

It may seem counter-intuitive, but as a cyclist you are far safer riding out in the lane of traffic than you are hugging the shoulder or riding next to the parked cars.

There are several reasons for this. Primarily, if drivers don't HAVE to see you, they won't. They won't slow down, and that's unsafe for you. They won't notice that you are going straight while they are turning right, and they will cut you off, and that's unsafe for you. Riding next to parked

cars puts you at great risk of riding smack into opening car doors, because parked drivers don't look for cyclists before they swing open their doors. Also, riding on the side of the road puts you in loose gravel, potholes, broken glass, and other car detritus.

Look at where those sharrows are, on the roads that have them. Our Bethlehem Streets Dept installed them properly; the sharrows show where you as a cyclist should position yourself. Try it. Take that near middle-of-the-lane spot, ride in a straight line and you will find you are out of the road debris, out of the door zone and clearly visible to all drivers. On roads without sharrows, the principle you need to follow is this: Ride as far to the right as you can safely travel in the lane going in your direction. This means, you stay out of the door zone and visible to other drivers, and usually will put you in the middle of your travel lane. The basic rules of riding a bike are to act like a vehicle — ride with the flow traffic, stop at all stop signs and lights, signal your turns, etc.. So, for example, where there's a right turn only lane and you are going straight, look behind you, signal your move and get into the lane of traffic that's going straight.

3. THE MORE OF US WHO RIDE, THE SAFER WE ALL ARE

There's some intriguing research, cited by Peter Walker in his 2017 book *How Cycling Can Save the World*, that shows that the cyclist mode share outweighs even helmet use as a safety factor for cyclists. Translation from transportation-nerd jargon: The more of us who ride our bikes, the safer we all are.

I don't know all the reasons for this, but I've noticed over the years that my experience as a cyclist has made me act differently when I get behind the wheel of my car — I drive slower as well as more cautiously, than I did when I was only a car driver.

4. HELP IS AVAILABLE

When I first took to my bike I was baffled at how to go about it, but in that pre-internet time there weren't a lot of resources for someone who wanted to learn to travel by bike. Now, though, we have plenty of resources, both online and in person.

An array of on-line resources includes: cyclingsavvy.org; bicyclecoalition.org (Bicycle Coalition of Greater Philadelphia); transalt.org (NYC's advocacy group Transportation Alternatives); adventurecycling.org (resources for long-distance bike travel) and our very own lvcat.org, the Coalition for Appropriate Transportation. For those in Bethlehem, consider a visit to CAT, if only to check out the many resources available there. (FULL DISCLOSURE: I've been involved with CAT since its inception over 25 years ago, for many years as its attorney and in more recent years as a board member.)

For about the price of a tank or two of gas, you can become a CAT member. Located at 1935 W. Broad Street, CAT has a fully-equipped bike repair/maintenance shop, open to you and staffed by volunteers who can walk you through most any bike problem. Don't know how to work your gears? need to replace or repair a tire or pump up a flat one? Need to get rid of a squealing brake or a noisy chain? Go to CAT. CAT also offers basic and advanced mechanics classes.

Most useful to anyone considering swapping out car rides for the occasional bike trip, CAT offers classes on how to ride the roads safely. They can also help with logistics like route choices best suited to your comfort levels and how to equip your bike for city travel.

5. BIKING IS ENJOYABLE

Doh! Do I really have to say this? Of course cycling safety is serious, but riding a bike is fun. It's human-scaled transportation at a speed that connects us to our beautiful city. You don't need special shoes or lycra or glow-in-the-dark clothes. Get on your bike, pedal, smile. It's that simple.

- Anne

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