

Police see the worst, by design, but kindness abounds



Robert Pickett has been a Portland Police Officer for eight years. He has spent most of that time working in inner Southeast Portland, first as a patrol officer, and more recently as a Neighborhood Response Team officer working on neighborhood livability issues.

Business and home owners often call me to complain about homeless people on and around their property, but the one that I received a few weeks ago was a little unusual.

STREET BLUES

Robert Pickett

A person living in the caller's tool shed out back had begun leaving trash and feces around her property and scaring her neighbors. She wanted to know what I could do to help her. Most people would be quick to act if they discovered someone living in their outbuilding, but by the way she spoke, it sounded as if this person had been there a while. I dug a little deeper.

It turned out the man, whose name she didn't know, had been living in the tool shed since before she and her husband purchased the house, eight months ago. Since he didn't seem to have anywhere to go, they let him stay there after they bought it. His behavior recently turned disruptive, but because he was there with permission and refused to leave willingly, she had to go through a lengthy civil eviction process,

which was still ongoing. In addition to the garbage and feces, she was also worried that he might retaliate when deputies issued him an eviction notice.

Though not the first homeless-person-overstays-his-welcome call I'd received, this seemed a little extreme. My jaded, devil cop was yelling in my ear that this was a problem completely of the woman's own creation, and now she wants me to fix it for her.

At the same time my patient, angel cop was whispering sweetly in my other ear that helping people out of their own holes is a large part of policing. And even more importantly, the kindness and generosity to strangers that this couple had shown to a needy man is vitally important to the health of our entire community, even if it works out poorly in some individual instances.

The important role kindness and love play in society can be easy to miss as an officer.

Imagine a warm summer evening, burgers on the grill, a chilled IPA in hand, chatting with good friends and neighbors sitting in chairs on the freshly-cut lawn ... the kids playing joyfully with puppies nearby ... How many of us would think, "You know, I should call 911 and invite a cop over to share this with us."

None of us, of course. We call police when there is a crisis. We call when we are threatened or attacked, or someone has stolen our stuff. Sometimes the suspects and victims know each other. Often they do not. The police are needed when bad luck strikes, and when hate, anger, greed, desperation or selfishness disrupt our ability to live together respectfully and peacefully.

Officers see society at our worst on a daily basis. These sights embolden the jaded devil cop who yells a sarcastic reply to the woman asking for help out of her hole.

They can also obscure the tens of thousands of acts of kindness conducted among Portlanders that police are never called about, including who-knows-how-many folks providing a bed, a couch, or even a shed to friends, and strangers, in need of a roof.

Acts without which I suspect I'd have hundreds of times the number of calls to answer.

Following the angel cop's whispered instructions, I discussed with the woman various solutions to her problem, as well as alternative ways she might help homeless folks in the future.

And I thanked her for her kindness to a stranger.

Welcome to Portland – the Portland of North America

BY MARGAUX MENNESSON
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Portland is the most successful North American city at implementing policies to promote bicycling, according to a new study just published by researchers at Rutgers University and

Virginia Tech.

The authors, John Pucher and Ralph Buehler, compared nine North American cities: Portland, Chicago, New York, Minneapolis, Toronto,

Montreal, San Francisco, Washington, and Vancouver. They concluded that "the success of Portland is important because it shows that even car-dependent American cities can greatly increase cycling by implementing the right package of infrastructure, programs, and policies."

The results are significant because for decades, people have been arguing that bicycling just won't work in the US like it does in Europe and South America thanks to different land use patterns and the cultural significance of the automobile. The argument is surfacing now in New York City, where a backlash against bicycling is being led by a group that claims, "(New York) will never be Amsterdam, never be Copenhagen ... we are never going to be Portland."

Indeed, New York will never be anything but New York. But that doesn't mean bicycles will never fit in New York. In fact, the "bike-fication" of New York, Portland, and other US cities is probably inevitable. But the Portland story shows that US cities can shift the transportation paradigm without losing their identity. We can learn from the successes and challenges of other cities, but we don't have to become those cities.

In fact, U.S. cities are pioneering a new kind of bicycle community already. For example, Portland is deconstructing the boundaries that used to be drawn between recreational bicycling and bicycling for transportation. Not long ago, researchers even suggested that the perception of

bicycling as a recreational activity in the United States might account for our resistance to using a bike to get to work, school, or other utilitarian trips. Transportation advocates and recreational bicyclists operated in two different circles.

Now, the economic benefits of recreational bicycling – such as industry growth, tourism, and job-creation – are some of the strongest reasons in the advocate's toolkit for making the case for bicycling. In Portland, trail advocates and racing organizations work together with transportation advocates to promote a vision of safe, active communities with streets connecting to parks and other recreational opportunities.

But even though evidence shows we're making progress when it comes to transforming streets and changing behaviors, it doesn't mean it's getting easier. It wasn't easy when it happened in Europe, either. When, in the 1970s, their governments began taking action to reverse decades of increasing automobile dominance through a mix of incentives and disincentives, policy, investments, infrastructure and education, they faced sharp resistance from citizens.

While Portland and the other nine cities are compared to "bicycle islands" in an auto-dominated landscape, the metaphor is a bit misleading. First, none of the cities is making decisions in a bubble. Spending and policy decisions are greatly influenced by state and federal priorities. Second, we are still struggling to make bicycling and walking safe and accessible across diverse communities and populations within the city.

As the report points out, in each of the nine cities bicycle ridership is much higher within older, gentrifying neighborhoods closer to the city center than in outlying neighborhoods. The city of Portland has a bicycle mode split of 5.8 percent compared with just 2.4 percent in the Metro region. This points to areas where we should focus investments now to keep building on existing support within the community.

• Land use, jobs, and housing. As Rob Sadowsky pointed out in the previous Healthy Streetbeat column our region has a mismatch when it comes to jobs and

housing, meaning that employment opportunities are not always within easy reach of where we live. In some neighborhoods, even basic services like grocery stores and health care might not be located within walking or biking distance (particularly for those with physical disabilities).

• Barriers to bicycling. Education and encouragement programs must be targeted to address culturally specific barriers. To broaden access to bicycling, we must tailor education and encouragement programs, as well as engineering and infrastructure solutions, to address the needs of specific communities and cultures. By doing so, we make bicycling safer and more convenient for everyone.

• Safety concerns. In larger cities like

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New York and Chicago, the experience of riding a bike in traffic is still too harrowing for many people. Law enforcement has not been as effective when it comes to protecting access to the bike lane, ticketing lawbreakers, or punishing those who kill or seriously injure vulnerable users.

Those parts of our culture that make us different from Europe may present some of the biggest challenges, but they also lead to some of the most creative solutions. By ensuring that diverse voices are at the table early and throughout the decision making process, by listening to the concerns of neighborhoods, business associations and individuals, we can move together toward the future of vibrant, healthy communities.

Portland isn't going to be the next Copenhagen. It's just going to be the next Portland.



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Healthy Streetbeat is a monthly column for Street Roots written by the Bicycle Transportation Alliance (BTA). Our contributors are Rob Sadowsky, executive director, and Margaux Mennesson, communications director.