

Building utility into the vision for modern transportation

BY MARGAUX MENNESSON
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Last week, 28 of the best craftsmen, designers and custom bicycle builders in the country came to Portland to take part in the annual bicycle building challenge

known as Oregon Manifest. Each year, constructors must design and build a bike that meets rigorous design criteria for that year's challenge. After unveiling their

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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.

work to the public, entrants compete in the Oregon Manifest field test. The field test assesses the real-world function of every bike in the challenge in diverse environments including hills, byways, and off-road sections.

The challenge this year: build the next generation of utility bikes for the modern rider.

There's a reason this event takes place in Portland, where more people choose to bike to work, to school, to the grocery store, and around the neighborhood. From 2001 to 2009, the number of people who commute by bike has increased 222 percent. In Portland, 40 percent of kids walk and bike to school, compared to the national average of 11 percent. The demand for a bike that serves as a tool in daily life has been growing as fast as the number of riders.

Portland is the best place to push the limits of American bicycle construction. Oregon Manifest has stepped up the competition in the past few years, evolving the design criteria to demand higher functionality for modern urban riders. This year, constructors designed bikes with features such as integrated lights and locks, saddle and handlebar height that can be

adjusted without special tools, custom racks, cargo carrying capacity, electric assist and more.

Bike shops in Portland are helping make utility bikes more available and affordable than ever. After all, just because you want to bike to work or the grocery store, doesn't mean you need a Dutch-style cargo bike. For many people, the perfect utilitarian bicycle is one that's comfortable to ride and has a basket or a rack that fits a bag of groceries.

Utility also means having a bike that works. The Portland non-profit Wrench Raiders, a volunteer-run group that provides free bicycle repair service to people experiencing homelessness or income restrictions, understands that keeping bikes working is critical for people who rely on their bicycle to get to meals, a job, or a safe place. Wrench Raiders' mobile bike repair shop brings tools, parts and skilled mechanics directly to people who need it.

This focus on innovation, creativity, and equity is helping put Portland on the map of world-class bicycle cities. In a recent bike index, an international consulting group evaluated cities on eleven categories, including infrastructure, facilities, urban planning, bicycle culture (has the bicycle reestablished itself as transport among regular citizens or only sub-cultures?); gender split (what percentage of the city's cyclists are male and female?); social acceptance (how do drivers and the community at large regard urban cyclists?); and perception of safety (Is the perception of safety reflected in helmet-wearing rates?).

At No. 11, Portland is the leading American city on the list. "Investment in solid infrastructure, a broad social acceptance and good political leadership have paid off," Mikael Colville-Andersen, founder of the blog Copenhagenize writes.

But he says, "For all the legendary

infrastructure, and willingness to experiment, it still boggles our minds why the gender split is suffering. It's a warning signal Portland should take seriously. Tapping into the reservoir of potential citizen cyclists who



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don't want to ride with all that gear, or be a part of the various sub-cultures in the city, should be a major priority."

In the best bicycle cities, riding a bike is seamlessly integrated into the culture, the street, and the daily life of residents. Riding a bike doesn't require a change of clothes, shoes, hairstyle or routine. In Portland, constructors are helping build utility into the vision for urban transportation. Innovative designers like those at Oregon Manifest are helping put more people on bikes. Groups like Wrench Raiders are helping keep more people on bikes.

The call from Portland is loud and clear. We are building streets where people feel safe and confident on a bike. We are building bikes that make people feel safe and confident on the street.

A utility bike on display at Oregon Manifest

Waterfront

By Robyn G

Here I sit again, peering
At pigeons perched upon a wire
As I watch them I wonder
If they ever get tired.

They live only to roam;
With no wish for a home
Just feathers to fly (nature-supplied)
As they take off, I'm left so very alone...

Justifiably so, their lift unfolds....
Reason being that impending falcon on high!
A human-planted peregrine swoops among them in play,
Teasing the troop that already fed her today.

I see my fate as not unlike that chilly-river
Can't nobody hold it in their hands...
So carefully cradled in my clutch (only I) can-
See it all again: slipping away and down just like pretty sand.

My homeless feet, under this bucket for a seat
At Waterfront my ass is parked...
I've sentenced myself with this unending hope
for what's beyond the dope
Presently I'd turn down a bud for a bar of soap!



By Jon Cornelison

Have an opinion or a story to share? Send us your letters addressed "to the editor" to streetrootsnews@gmail.com