

GREEN GOING

Biking to a better Eugene

By Alan Pittman

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With global warming threatening “drastic implications,” Eugene needs to “reach for the gold” in bicycling, Eugene Mayor Kitty Piercy said at a recent biking and walking summit.

Eugene now has a silver rating for bike friendliness from the League of American Bicyclists. “Frankly, silver is not good enough,” Piercy told the gathering of 225 in October at the UO.

But Eugene may face an uphill climb to a gold bicycling rating and greener future. Bike commuting rates in Eugene are decreasing, not increasing, according to U.S. Census data. In 1980, 8 percent biked to work. In 1990, 5.8 percent biked, and by 2000, 5.5 percent biked.

During the last three decades, Eugene built an acclaimed bike system that led the nation with 33 miles of off-street paths, 90 miles of bike lanes and five river bridges. Mayor Piercy called bicycling “a major source of our community’s identity, economy and lifestyle for 30 years.”

But now, Eugene may be resting on its laurels as other cities pass it by on the bike path. Eugene trails gold-rated Corvallis, with 7.5 percent bike commuting, and gold-rated Portland, where the biking rate almost doubled in the last decade.

WHY BIKE?

Biking is good for the planet, good for the city and good for you, studies show.

Locally, biking offers one of the fastest ways to reduce global warming. Because 92 percent of local power is hydroelectric and not from fossil fuels, green buildings here don’t have as much impact on reducing carbon dioxide. The average local person generates almost 10 times more global warming per day by driving alone than by using energy in the home, based on carbon accounting data. A person who bikes to work instead of driving for one day in Eugene saves the rough carbon equivalent of turning all the lights out in her house for two months.

Given the big green impact of biking, Sue Wolling of the Eugene Bicycle Coalition (EBC) said she’s disappointed the city’s sustainability initiative hasn’t focused on it more. “Where’s bicycling in this?” she asks. “It just seems like a no-brainer.”

Biking also saves on the major source of local air, noise and, indirectly, water pollution. Less of all of this pollution helps the local environment and makes cities more pleasant. And those still driving enjoy less traffic.

When people burn calories rather than oil, they are healthier. Inactivity and diet are now the second leading preventable cause of death in the U.S., behind tobacco. In Oregon, 57 percent of us are now overweight or obese.

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With efficient bike facilities far cheaper than freeways, bicycling lowers taxes. With biking far cheaper than \$3-a-gallon gas or \$22,000 for a Prius, bikes also fatten wallets while clearing skies and slimming thighs.

They’re also just fun. Albert Einstein was famously photographed with a big smile on his bike, where he said he first thought up his theory of relativity while riding.

WHERE’S THE MONEY?

But while bikes offer a lot of transportation bang for the buck, the city has invested comparatively few bucks in biking.

The regional TransPlan adopted in 2003 included a billion dollars for new and improved roads and freeways. Only about 1 percent of the money was targeted for bicycling. That’s far less than the 5.5 percent bike commuting rate, a rate TransPlan planned to slightly decline by 2015.