

Start poking at the reasons to bike or not to bike and a complex brew of factors bubbles to the surface, including infrastructure, housing availability, gas prices, cultural norms and media propaganda (really).

The city of Eugene's Transportation System Plan aims to double the percentage of bicycle trips in Eugene by 2035. It's a praiseworthy mission, and this story won't use up space describing the myriad reasons why biking is better.

In order to meet its biking goal, Eugene has to tackle the barriers to biking. Eugene needs to create safer bikeways, connect existing pieces of bike infrastructure, curb bike theft and boost education to get more people biking in Eugene.

Every day, groups of local bike advocates work at tearing down the barriers to biking. Here's what they're doing.

KIDICAL MASS

You've probably seen them before: a sizeable flock of brave young bicyclists pedaling around town as a many-wheeled unit, strutting their active transportation stuff. This legion of youthful bike enthusiasts calls itself Kidical Mass, a monthly family ride that proves there's strength in numbers.

Shane MacRhodes started this venture in 2008 as a way of encouraging parents to ride with their kids. It's a play on the idea of "critical mass," which in biking terms means the safety, camaraderie and visibility that comes from riding in a group.

MacRhodes manages Eugene School District 4J's Safe Routes to Schools program, although he's soon stepping down to become a fulltime dad. To him, the future of a bike-centric Eugene hinges on families allowing kids to take control of their own transportation.

"We've gotten to this point where we're protecting our kids to death," MacRhodes says. "We fear for their safety so much that we are driving them around everywhere out of fear."

Look at some of the top killers, MacRhodes says — car crashes and health problems that arise from poor diet and inactivity.

"We're not teaching our kids the important skills of being out and moving around their community. We're really doing a disservice to them," he explains.

Education, MacRhodes says, can play a huge role in boosting the number of bikers in Eugene. Through Safe Routes to School, sixth graders in the Bethel, 4J and Springfield school districts take a nine-hour bike safety education program that helps them build the skills necessary to navigate roads safely and predictably in traffic. Graduates of the course emerge equipped for a future of biking.

MacRhodes describes his dream for a "traffic garden" near the 4J Education Center, just off the river path — essentially, a city in miniature where kids and their parents can practice biking skills in a mock urban setting.

It takes both pieces, MacRhodes says: education and infrastructure.

BEYOND BIKE LANES

"Eugene is still essentially a suburban community," explains mayor-elect Lucy Vinis, who spent most of this year canvassing neighborhoods, talking to the people of Eugene about everything from homelessness to transportation.

For the most part, she says, "we're going to drive to the grocery store, or we're driving children around to their various events."

A 2014 survey found that one-third of Eugene residents bike at least once a month, but as with many U.S. cities, transportation systems here still revolve around big, loud, carbon-emitting cars. A 2014 study found that about 75 percent of people in Eugene drive in a personal vehicle on a weekly basis, and 50 percent drive daily.

Ipsso facto, Eugene's roads serve cars. Bike lanes, while better than nothing, will never feel as safe or freeing as structures built specifically for bikes.

"What we're learning now is that to actually increase the number of people who ride bikes, we're going to have to move beyond bike lanes," says Reed Dunbar, bicycle

and pedestrian planner for the city of Eugene.

This gets at the barrier of safety — many people don't feel safe riding a bicycle next to traffic with only a thin line of paint separating them. The experience becomes even scarier when they have to merge with traffic and stand their ground with cars flanking them.

Vinis says she wants to make it easier to bike in Eugene, but she understands the safety issue — it's one of her own personal barriers.

"I am not one of those people confident being on a bike in traffic," she shares. That lack of confidence prevents many people from hopping on a bike to get to work or run errands.

Take an average bike lane on a busy street, Schlossberg says — only 7 percent of a given community will feel comfortable biking there.

In Denmark and the Netherlands, "you almost don't feel what's happening with cars on the street," Schlossberg describes. "They're parallel systems, but it doesn't matter what the cars are doing."

In Eugene, everyone knows someone who's been hit by a car, and damages range from scrapes and concussions to injuries requiring reconstructive surgery and, in rare cases,

death. Eugene's David Minor Theater is named after a biking accident victim. People have real reasons to feel apprehensive about sharing the road with cars.

Add protections and buffers so the pathway feels separated from traffic, and it's a different story.

JOIN THE NETWORK

On a sunny fall afternoon, people on bicycles glide freely down 24th Avenue near University Park. They have the whole road to themselves, save pedestrians, and a slaphappy ease presides over the cyclists as they parade down the street. Cars? What cars?

Without looming hunks of metal zooming past and belching exhaust, people on bikes ride side by side, chatting, rolling at a conversational pace and taking it all in. It's the complete opposite of a rush-hour traffic jam.

Two times a year, Eugene Sunday Streets sets up shop in an area of town and closes streets to car traffic — it gives cyclists a chance to experience the safe, car(e)free feeling that boosts the number of people who feel comfortable on a bike. More than 10,000 people participated in this year's events, according to the city of Eugene.



'When you're biking, you're happy,' says Emily Farthing with the city of Eugene

PHOTO BY TODD COOPER