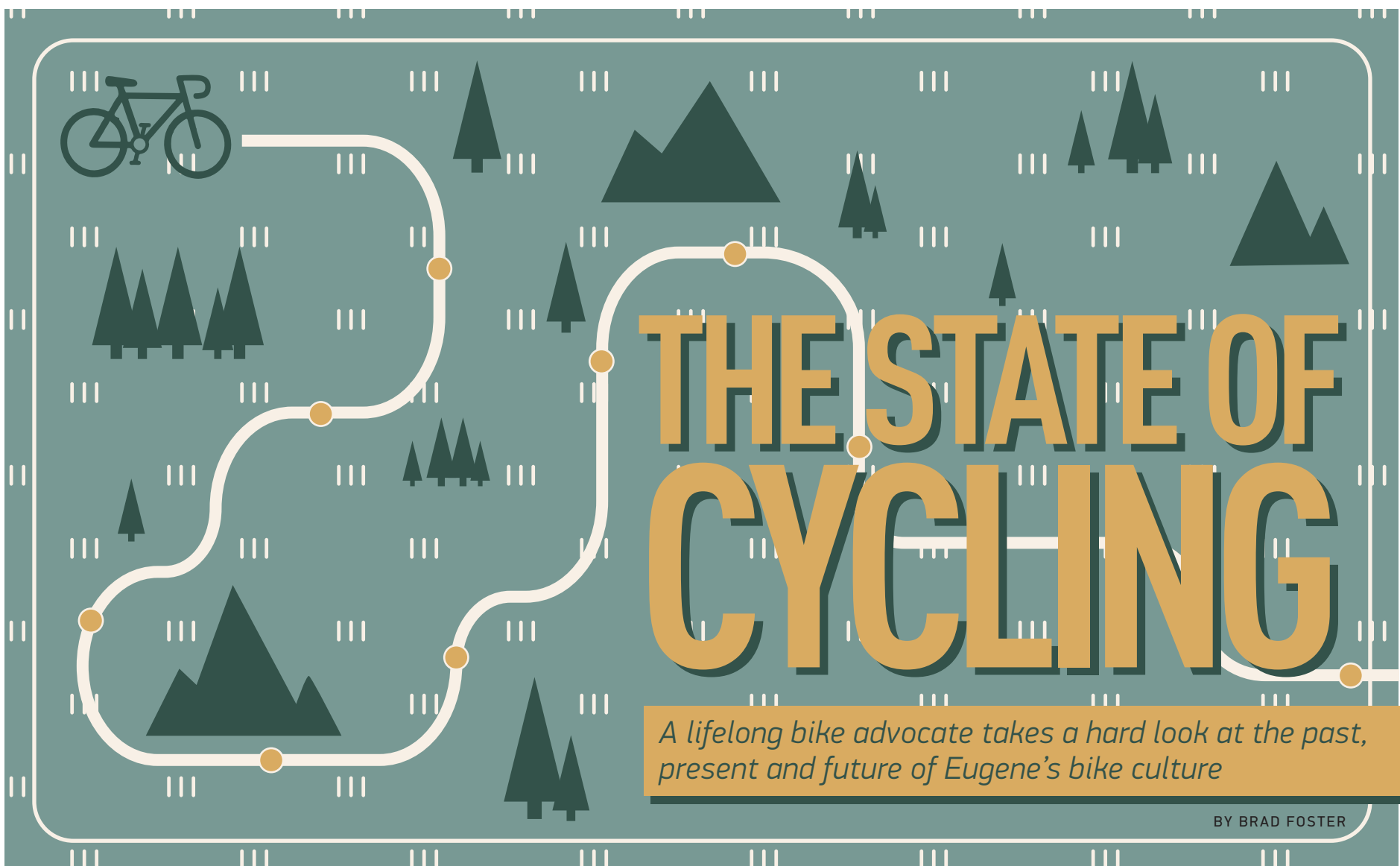




Eugene is a cycling failure and has been for nearly a decade.

How can that be? We have bike lanes and buffered bike lanes. We have bike signals. We have a two-way cycle-track and plans for more. We have shared-lane markings and bike paths.

We have bike thieves.

And we have a bike club that puts on an annual century ride and weekly rides. We have city staff dedicated to putting on bike parties and coordinating all things bikey.

We even have a bike master plan and a city policy of increasing bike use while curtailing car use.

If you look in the right places at the right time, you can even find some people riding bikes in Eugene. Some of them work in traffic planning, and one of them is our city traffic engineer.

How can we be failing? Is this crazy talk?

Sadly, no. Failure is the only valid way to describe the current state of cycling in Eugene.

Before I delve into the nature of this epic failure, we should ask ourselves if it even matters. Why should we care if anyone rides a bike instead of driving?

There are almost too many answers to this question to fit into this space, but allow me to list a few public ills that are reduced or eliminated when people choose to ride a bike: cancer, heart disease, obesity, diabetes, stroke, hypertension, social isolation, road damage, stress and, above all, climate change.

Yes, transportation choices matter — they matter a lot.

THE STATS

Let's examine a few numbers. The federal government is kind enough to regularly send out questionnaires that recipients are required to fill out in full and return or face penalties. This provides annual data called the American Community Survey (ACS).

One of the things measured by the ACS is the mode of travel people use for their commute. Once upon a time, Eugene enjoyed regular increases in cycling's modal share of commuters, peaking in 2009 at 10.8 percent, which represented almost 7,100 of the nearly 62,000 Eugeneans who traveled to work inside the city.

Since that peak, cycling modal share fell by 43 percent to 6.2 percent of all commuters in 2016, which is only 5,000

cyclists amongst the current 76,000 commuters. We added 14,000 commuters and lost more than 2,000 people on bikes.

Like I said, failure.

Is this decline unique to Eugene, or is it a regional phenomenon? Could it just be the weather?

No, it's pretty much a Eugene thing. While Portland did see a couple of recent years with cycling modal shares at 7 percent, it's currently sitting right where it's been for most of the past decade at 6.3 percent.

Benton County, which includes Corvallis, currently boasts a cycling modal share of more than 9 percent, and has seen sizable gains over the past decade.

Eugene is uniquely failing in this region. Even big, bad Seattle hasn't seen losses in bicycle use in spite of its terrain and weather issues.

Why (and why not)?

DANGER

The No. 1 reason people have given on surveys for why they don't ride bikes in this region has always been a perception of danger. Is cycling in Eugene uniquely deadly?

It is true that, compared to the nation as a whole, a higher percentage of road deaths in Eugene are attributable to people on bikes. But when we account for the percentage of people on bikes, Eugene is actually a safer place to ride than the rest of the nation, and by quite a large margin.

Also, the number of people killed annually on our roads for all modes has been pretty constant over the past decade and a half, so there's no correlation between actual danger and our decline in bike riding.

Additionally, unless you're in the habit of riding drunk at night without lights on the wrong side of the road — the so-called "drunk ninja salmon" — you're less likely to be injured or killed on a bike than in a car.

Could a perception of danger be the key? There's no solid data on this, but it is a possibility. I have encountered scores of people who no longer ride bikes because they or someone close to them either had a close call or an actual collision.

One issue is what is sometimes referred to as "winning the door prize," which happens when a car door opens into a cyclist. In fact, San Francisco has found that being doored is the No. 1 cause of cyclist death and injury.



INFRASTRUCTURE

Our primary infrastructure failing as a city is the many miles of bike lanes that put cyclists within range of an opening car door, called the "door-zone bike lane" (DZBL). Very few people know that cyclists do not have to ride in a bike lane that has a hazard, and the door zone is definitely a hazard.

However, it takes a special sort of person to ride along on Crescent Avenue in the travel lane next to the DZBL. (Yes, I'm special, but I don't enjoy it one bit.)

Once one is aware of this threat, it becomes clear that our stated miles of bike lanes are a cruel hoax. A traffic engineer who was very supportive of people riding bikes put many of these lanes in originally. Unfortunately, she wasn't aware of the danger involved.

Worse, Eugene is still putting them in, and is only now becoming aware of their negative impact on cyclists. It's actually a challenge to find a way to get around this city without ending up in a door-zone bike lane.

We have some other bike lane failings. Our roads are severely crowned, with most of the elevation drop coming in the six feet nearest the gutter. That also happens to be where the bike lanes are. This has two negative effects: It causes all