

HEALTH ON TWO WHEELS

Sonoma County: Future Bicycle Capital of the Nation?

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I am frustrated that since moving from Boston to Sonoma County, I have had to give up bicycle commuting for car commuting. I used to thrive on starting and ending each day hopping on my bicycle, communing with the outdoors, and exercising my body on my commutes between home and various destinations in the greater Boston area. I was undeterred by freezing winters, black ice or aggressive drivers: I simply added more layers of clothing, watched the roads more carefully and learned to anticipate the traffic around me. I was proud that on certain days my bicycle was the only one parked in the bike racks of my destination.

Since moving to Sonoma County, however, I do not feel safe bicycling to and from work, despite living less than two miles away. Although three-quarters of the route has clearly marked bike lanes with adequate width, the other quarter has lanes that are either too narrow or altogether absent on streets where cars are whizzing by at 30-40 miles per hour. Strong as my desire is to ride my bike, I cannot justify taking such a risk.

I am not alone in my hesitancy to commute by bicycle. In a recent guest opinion in the *Press Democrat*, local winemaker Matthew Wilson describes his own sad conversion from two-wheel to four-wheel commuting.[1] In 2008, as gas prices hit \$4 a gallon, he decided to start bicycling more often. Initially, he experienced the wonderful benefits that come with bicycling: increased energy, weight loss, improved mood and monetary savings. He went so far as to get racks and panniers for his bike, and he even made Costco trips using only his bicycle. Five years later--after many near-accidents despite wearing bright colors, using hand signals and anticipating the actions of unsafe drivers--he laments that "my cycling career is over." After switching to an SUV, he observes, "I can't tell you how comfortable and safe I feel now with 3,000 pounds of metal protecting me."

A few weeks after reading Mr. Wilson's essay, I was dismayed by yet another article in the *Press Democrat* describing a hit-and-run road-rage incident in west Santa Rosa. A cyclist and a driver got into a disagreement, and the driver apparently threw the car into reverse to confront the cyclist, then ran him over and left him with multiple broken bones and internal injuries. Given such grave risks for bicyclists sharing the roads with motorists, it is not surprising that only 1% of Sonoma County residents use their bicycle for trips that are less than 3 miles.

The low bicycle ridership rate in Sonoma County is unacceptable from a public health standpoint, especially in light of the obesity epidemic. The percentage of obese Sonoma County adults (18 or older) doubled from 14% in 2001 to 28% in 2007. Physical activity, in addition to good diet and nutrition, is an essential tool for combating obesity and improving the health, fitness and well being of Sonoma County residents. Bicycling, in turn, is a fun, low-impact and practical means of increasing physical activity for young and old alike. Boosting the percentage of people who bike instead of drive would also reduce total greenhouse emissions and protect the environment: bicycling and walking are the only transportation modes that have essentially zero carbon emissions.

Some people may be tempted to agree with Matthew Wilson's statement "No one will ever be able to convince me that cars and bicycles can coexist." Perhaps a visit to Davis, just an hour and a half away, might change some minds. For the health of our county's population and the protection of our environment, I advocate we follow our neighbor's inspiring example.

Davis is often called the bicycle capital of the United States because of its high rate of bicycle usage and its long history of providing a cyclist-friendly infrastructure and environment. The city is beautiful proof that cars and bicycles can indeed coexist.

Davis admittedly benefits from certain natural advantages, such as its mild climate and flat topography, factors over which even the most ardent bicycle advocates in other cities like freezing Boston or hilly San

Francisco have no control. But Sonoma County is similarly blessed with a mild climate, as well as relatively flat terrain in all nine of its incorporated cities.

What then is the missing factor? One word: *attitude*. As noted in a conference presentation, “The most significant element has been the attitude of Davis residents and city officials and the provisions they have made to ensure cycles are not crowded off city streets by growing automobile traffic.”[5] This shift in attitude and perspective began during the April 1966 Davis City Council election, when the primary issue was the provision of bikeways for commuters on public streets. Pro-bikeway candidates were elected, and they immediately installed a trial system of bikeways--which proved to be immensely popular. Rapid expansion of the system followed, and the rest is history.

Ever since that momentous election, Davis’s policies and investments have reflected its pro-cyclist attitude and its commitment to a bike-friendly culture. The city has spent millions installing bike underpasses, traffic-slowing devices, bike roundabouts and ample bike parking, with approximate average expenditures of \$200 per person per year on bicycling infrastructure. To further promote bicycling and its benefits to the community, Davis has hired two full-time city bicycle/pedestrian coordinators, established city and campus bicycle advisory committees, and used local, state and federal monies to fund a wide range of bicycling facilities and programs.

Over time, this proactive attitude of the Davis community and its public officials has created a unique bicycle culture in which an atmosphere of mutual understanding and respect exists between cyclists and motorists. This culture is promoted from the earliest beginnings: there are no school buses in Davis. Instead, kids are encouraged to bike or walk to school. Furthermore, UC Davis has banned almost all motor vehicles from its central roadways, enabling cyclists at the campus to mostly avoid sharing roads with motorized traffic. The city of Davis even engineered a bicycle signal light that offers cyclists their own separate phase during which they may cross a busy intersection. Not surprisingly, bicycle collision rates at such intersections have been dramatically reduced since their implementation. The ultimate evidence of the city’s bicycle culture is its adoption of the vintage high-wheeler bicycle as its official logo.

The results of Davis’s commitment to bicycling are impressive. Ninety-five percent of the roads in Davis have clearly marked bike lanes, and 20-25% of all trips in Davis are made by bicycle, more than any other city in America. (Remember that only 1% of trips in Sonoma County are made by bicycle.) Davis is the only city in California and one of only four cities nationwide--the others being Portland, Oregon, and Boulder and Fort Collins, Colorado--to receive “platinum” standing from the American League of Bicyclists, an organization that recognizes communities across the country for their bike friendliness. (Although we still have a long way to go, Sonoma County can be proud that both Windsor and the city of Sonoma have achieved “bronze” status from the ALB for their bike friendliness.)

Davis’s commitment to bicycling has also improved its quality of life and its environment. The average BMI in Davis is below the national average, in part thanks to all that pedaling exercise, and the city enjoys reduced traffic congestion, low air pollution, and less demand for parking spaces.

All told, Davis is a striking example of what Sonoma County can accomplish if enough dedicated residents and officials come together and agree upon a common vision for the future of bicycling. If Davis can do it, why can’t we?

Rome wasn’t built in a day, nor will Sonoma County develop a bicycle culture and roadway system overnight. But there are five simple steps that we can take immediately to get started:

Watch “America’s First Platinum Bicycle City.” This three-minute video describes Davis’s bicycling culture and provides a vision of what is possible for Sonoma County. It’s available at faircompanies.com/videos/view/americas-1st-platinum-bicycle-city-davis-ca.

Join the Sonoma County Bicycle Coalition for as little as \$35 per year at www.bikesonoma.org. SCBC is the primary local organization working to make Sonoma County more bicycle friendly. It has benefited the community through such programs as Safe Routes to School, the annual Sonoma County Bicycle Expo, the annual Bike to Work Day, and most recently, the "I Bike Sonoma County Century Ride." I recently met with their executive and outreach directors, and I was impressed by how committed and passionate they are about advancing the cause of bicycling in Sonoma County. They can't do it alone, however, so they need your help and support.

Ride your bicycle. Experience the streets of Sonoma County on two wheels. If you can bike to work safely, be grateful, and continue doing so. If you find the commute too fraught with risks, then speak up and try to have your desired improvements implemented. If you have the opportunity, make a weekend trip to Davis and experience bicycling there for yourself.

When driving, share the road. Be patient, and make sure you are not yet another motorist who discourages or even endangers bicyclists. On the flip side, when bicycling, make sure to obey the rules of the road. Bicyclists, after all, need to be similarly respectful of cars.

Advocate for Sonoma County to start its own bike-sharing program. Such programs have been wildly successful in Washington, DC, and New York City. Visit www.streetfilms.org/the-phenomenal-success-of-capital-bikeshare/ to learn more. Recently, I tried out the new bike share program in Salt Lake City and loved the experience. In August, San Francisco launched its own sharing system, with 350 bikes at 35 stations. If our neighbor down south can implement such an innovative program, why can't we?

Sonoma County--with its year-round sunny weather, gorgeous vineyards, gentle terrain, and passionate bicyclist community--has the perfect setup to become the future bicycle capital of the United States. As an avid bicyclist and father of two young children, I dream that one day Sonoma County residents, both young and old, will be able to bicycle safely wherever they wish to go, with mutual respect between motorists and bicyclists en route to their respective destinations. I also dream that all nine cities in Sonoma County will be connected via safe bike routes that bring the county closer together and make it more cohesive.

As a family physician, I hope we can reverse the "diabesity" epidemic and achieve Health Action's vision of making Sonoma the "healthiest county in California."^[6] We can help achieve that dream by developing a comprehensive bicycle infrastructure and culture. I firmly believe that with collective focus of mindset and action, we can all work toward the goal of making Sonoma County the future bicycle capital of the nation.