

The Bike Ban Is Bad Medicine

By Charles Komanoff

Mayor Koch wants to re-start the bike ban. Three months after the city's first prohibition of bicycling on midtown Manhattan avenues was overturned in New York State Supreme Court, the Department of Transportation has filed legal papers that would enable the ban to take effect by mid-February.

As a cyclist and bike advocate, I know that we bicyclists have created much of our own problem, through inconsiderate and sometimes dangerous riding. But the ban is undeserved. It is grossly unfair. It will increase danger, not reduce it. It ignores positive steps taken by cyclists. It establishes a chilling precedent that could spread to other avenues, streets and cities. And it's disgraceful in light of Mayor Koch's failure to reduce auto traffic and air pollution, especially in midtown Manhattan.

Bicyclists are riding more safely. Accidents between bike riders and pedestrians in New York City were down 20 percent in 1987 compared to 1986. The decline was even sharper, 32 percent, since the Mayor's original ban announcement in late July, when many cyclists began improving their riding in response. Perhaps pedestrians have helped by being more observant of bicyclists. Moreover, last year's drop in accidents follows a 10 percent drop in 1986 from 1985. Conversely, drivers of motor vehicles injured and killed more pedestrians and bicyclists last year than the year before.

With bike-riding safety improving, isn't it time that the Mayor stopped punishing cyclists? His administration has ignored numerous initiatives from cycling groups on bike safety, education, law enforcement and engineering. The city has no policy in support of bicycling, even in simple things like installing bike parking racks and keeping key bridges open for bike-riding—just as there is no policy for curbing cars and pollution.

In re-starting the ban, Mayor Koch is breaking a promise he made in August to meet first with bicyclist representatives. He has never answered our proposals to reduce bicyclist-pedestrian conflict—targeting police enforcement to dangerous riding rather than ticketing for relatively trivial offenses; regulating motorist and pedestrian infractions that endanger legal bike riders; experimenting with police on bicycles, as in Seattle, Wash.; curbing the traffic overload that intensifies competition for space between riders and walkers.

Still, does it matter to anyone other than bicyclists if bikes are banned from Fifth, Madison and Park Avenues?

Yes. First, accidents to pedestrians may even increase, as cyclists ride more miles and more hours. Second, air pollution will worsen. Many bike messengers will switch to mopeds, which are unregulated for emissions despite an inherently polluting design. According to the D.O.T., each moped pollutes as much as 10 cars. Noise will worsen too. As for bicycle commuters, some will brave the ban or switch to mass transit, but others will take cabs, compounding congestion.

Third, bicycling is deeply woven in the city's economy. The messenger industry moves vital papers through the legal, financial and publishing communities, while providing a steady wage and entry into the labor force for thousands of motivated younger workers, many of them minorities. For hard-pressed artists and peripatetic free-lancers, bicycling is an affordable commute.

And for all its shortcomings, bicycling remains one of New York City's few robust ecological expressions. Bicycles are silent, use no fuel and produce no fumes. In effect they run on solar energy, captured via photosynthesis and human metabolism.

Bicycling is human-scale. It combines the range afforded by autos and the sense of place that walking allows. Bicycling is a living, breathing alternative to the city's domination by motor vehicles. Bikes are a rebuke to stretch limo's, mobile billboards, smoke-belching buses, car alarms and all the disruptive accoutrements of auto culture that the Mayor chooses to leave uncontrolled.

Finally, for those who do it, biking is emotionally fulfilling. There is magic in blending with traffic, feeling the wind in one's face, the sheer fact of traversing the city under one's own power. This is no excuse for running over pedestrians. But it is cause for the city to encourage bicyclists instead of trying to crush our spirit.

When bike riders capitalized on a technical flaw to block the ban last summer, Mayor Koch vowed that we would be "sorry" and our victory short-lived. In denying the drop in accidents and ignoring our constructive alternatives, the Mayor is being true to his word but untrue to safety and fair play. If the ban wins, more than bikers lose. Forcing bicycle-riding off some of our major streets is yet another step in extinguishing New York City's soul.

Charles Komanoff, an economist, is president of Transportation Alternatives, a bicyclists' advocacy group.

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alternatives

P.O. Box 2087
New York, New York 10009
212/866-7489

