

Building a Better Bike Lane

Bike-friendly cities in Europe are launching a new attack on car culture. Can the U.S. catch up?

By NANCY KEATES

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COPENHAGEN -- No one wears bike helmets here. They're afraid they'll mess up their hair. "I have a big head and I would look silly," Mayor Klaus Bondam says.

People bike while pregnant, carrying two cups of coffee, smoking, eating bananas. At the airport, there are parking spaces for bikes. In the emergency room at Frederiksberg Hospital on weekends, half the biking accidents are from people riding drunk. Doctors say the drunk riders tend to run into poles.



[Click on the image to see different models of Dutch-style bikes and where to buy them.](#)

Flat, compact and temperate, the Netherlands and Denmark have long been havens for bikers. In Amsterdam, 40% of commuters get to work by bike. In Copenhagen, more than a third of workers pedal to their offices. But as concern about global warming intensifies -- the European Union is already under emissions caps and tougher restrictions are expected -- the two cities are leading a fresh assault on car culture. A major thrust is a host of aggressive new measures designed to shift bike commuting into higher gear, including increased prison time for bike thieves and the

construction of new parking facilities that can hold up to 10,000 bikes.

The rest of Europe is paying close attention. Officials from London, Munich and Zurich (plus a handful from the U.S.) have visited Amsterdam's transportation department for advice on developing bicycle-friendly infrastructure and policies. Norway aims to raise bicycle traffic to at least 8% of all travel by 2015 -- double its current level -- while Sweden hopes to move from 12% to 16% by 2010. This summer, Paris will put thousands of low-cost rental bikes throughout the city to cut traffic, reduce pollution and improve parking.

The city of Copenhagen plans to double its spending on biking infrastructure over the next three years, and Denmark is about to unveil a plan to increase spending on bike lanes on 2,000 kilometers, or 1,240 miles, of roads. Amsterdam is undertaking an ambitious capital-improvement program that includes building a 10,000-bike parking garage at the main train station -- construction is expected to start by the end of next year. The city is also trying to boost public transportation usage, and plans to soon enforce stricter car-parking fines and increase parking fees to discourage people from driving.

Worried that immigrants might push car use up, both cities have started training programs to teach non-natives how to ride bikes and are stepping up bike training of children in schools. There are bike-only bridges under consideration and efforts to make intersections more rider-friendly by putting in special mirrors.



A Dutch "football" mom

The policy goal is to have bicycle trips replace many short car trips, which account for 6% of total emissions from cars, according to a document adopted last month by the European Economic and Social Committee, an organization of transportation ministers from EU member countries. Another report published this year by the Dutch Cyclists' Association found that if all trips shorter than 7.5 kilometers in the Netherlands currently made by car were by bicycle, the country would reduce its carbon-dioxide emissions by 2.4 million tons. That's about one-eighth of the amount of emissions it would need to reduce to meet the Kyoto Protocol.

Officials from some American cities have made pilgrimages to Amsterdam. But in the U.S., bike commuters face more challenges, including strong opposition from some small businesses, car owners and parking-garage owners to any proposals to remove parking, shrink driving lanes or reduce speed limits. Some argue that limiting car usage would hurt business. "We haven't made the tough decisions yet," says Sam Adams, city commissioner of Portland, Ore., who visited Amsterdam in 2005. There has been some movement. Last month, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced a proposal to add a congestion charge on cars and increase the number of bicycle paths in the city. It would also require commercial buildings to have indoor parking facilities for bikes.

Even in Amsterdam, not everyone is pro-biking. Higher-end shops have already moved out of the city center because of measures to decrease car traffic, says Geert-Pieter Wagenmakers, an adviser to Amsterdam's Chamber of Commerce, and now shops in the outer ring of the city are vulnerable. Bikes parked all over the sidewalk are bad for business, he adds.

Still, the new measures in Amsterdam and Copenhagen add to an infrastructure that has already made biking an integral part of life. People haul groceries in saddle bags or on handlebars and tote their children in multiple bike seats. Companies have indoor bike parking, changing rooms and on-site bikes for employees to take to meetings. Subways have bike cars and ramps next to the stairs.

Riding a bike for some has more cachet than driving a Porsche. Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende sometimes rides to work, as do lawyers, CEOs (Lars Rebién Sørensen, chief executive of Danish pharmaceutical giant Novo Nordisk, is famous for his on-bike persona) and members of parliament, often with empty children's seats in back. Dutch Prince Maurits van Oranje is often seen riding around town. "It's a good way to keep in

touch with people on the streets," says Tjeerd Herrema, deputy mayor of Amsterdam. Mr. Herrema's car and driver still make the trip sometimes -- to chauffeur his bag when he has too much work to carry.



Traffic in Copenhagen

Jolanda Engelhamp let her husband keep her car when they split up a few years ago because it was becoming too expensive to park. Now the 47-year-old takes her second-grade son to school on the back of her bike. (It's a half-hour ride from home.) Outside the school in Amsterdam, harried moms drop off children, checking backpacks and coats; men in suits pull up, with children's seats in back, steering while talking on their cellphones. It's a typical drop-off scene,

only without cars.

For Khilma van der Klugt, a 38-year-old bookkeeper, biking is more about health and convenience than concern for the environment. Her two older children ride their own bikes on the 25-minute commute to school while she ferries the four-year-old twins in a big box attached to the front of her bike. Biking gives her children exercise and fresh air in the morning, which helps them concentrate, she says. "It gets all their energy out." She owns a car, but she only uses it when the weather is really bad or she's feeling especially lazy.

Caroline Vonk, a 38-year-old government official, leaves home by bike at 8 a.m. and drops off her two children at a day-care center. By 8:15, she's on her way to work, stopping to drop clothes at the dry cleaner or to buy some rolls for lunch. On the way home, she makes a quick stop at a shop, picks up the children and is home by 5:55. "It is a pleasant way to clear my head," she says.

Teaching Newcomers

The programs for non-natives target those who view biking as a lower form of transportation than cars. "If they don't start cycling it will hurt," says Marjolein de Lange, who heads Amsterdam's pro-bicycle union *Fietsersbond* and has worked with local councils to set up classes for immigrant women.

On a recent Sunday afternoon, 23 women -- many in head-scarves -- gathered at a recreational center north of Amsterdam to follow seven Fietsersbond volunteers to learn to navigate through traffic. The three-hour event cost €3 (about \$4) and included practice weaving in and out of orange cones and over blocks of wood. It ended with all of the women gathering in a park for cake and lemonade.



Alamy

Bikes at the Amsterdam train station. Construction there begins soon on a 10,000-bike garage.

Though she faltered at times, Rosie Soemer, a 36-year-old mother of two who came to the Netherlands from Suriname, was sold. "It is so much easier to go everywhere by bike," she says.

Learning to ride was her husband's idea: He bought her a bicycle for her birthday a few months earlier and has been spending his lunch hour teaching her in a park. "It helps me if she can get around better," says her husband, Sam Soemer. "And it's safer than a car."

Amsterdam and Copenhagen are generally safer for bikers than the U.S. because high car taxes and gasoline prices tend to keep sport-utility vehicles off the road. In Denmark, the tax for buying a new car is as high as 180%. Drivers must be over 18 to get a license, and the tests are so hard that most people fail the first few times. Both cities have worked to train truck drivers to look out for bikers when they turn right at intersections, and changed mirrors on vehicles and at traffic corners so they're positioned for viewing cyclists.

As bike lanes become more crowded, new measures have been added to address bike safety. A recent survey found that people in Denmark felt less safe biking, though the risk of getting killed in a bike accident there has fallen by almost half. (The number of bicyclists killed fell to 31 in 2006 from 53 in 2004, and the number seriously injured dropped to 567 from 726 in that period.) According to one emergency room's statistics, the primary reason for accidents is people being hit by car doors opening; second is cars making right-hand turns and hitting bikers at intersections; third is bike-on-bike crashes. Bike-riding police officers now routinely fine cyclists in Amsterdam who don't have lights at night.

Parking for 10,000

Amsterdam is also working to improve the lack of parking. The city built five bike-parking garages over the past five years and plans a new one every year, including one with 10,000 spaces at the central railroad station. (While there's room for 2,000 bikes now, there are often close to 4,000 bikes there.) But even garages aren't enough. Bikers usually want to park right outside wherever they're going -- they don't like parking and walking.

Combating theft is an important plank in developing a bike-friendly culture. In 2003, the city created the Amsterdam Bicycle Recovery Center, a large warehouse where illegally parked bikes are taken. (Its acronym in Dutch is AFAC.) Every bike that goes through AFAC is first checked against a list of stolen bikes. After three months, unclaimed models are registered, engraved with a serial number and sold to a second-hand shop. At any one time, the center has about 6,000 bikes neatly arranged by day of confiscation, out of an estimated total of 600,000 bikes in the city.

How AFAC will encourage bike riding in Amsterdam is a somewhat perverse logic, because it means some 200 bikes are confiscated by city officials a day compared to a handful before it existed. The thinking is that the more bikes that are confiscated, the more bikes can be registered and the better the government can trace stolen bikes. The less nervous people are that their bikes will be stolen, the more likely they are to ride. "Is your bike gone? Check AFAC first," is the center's slogan.

Remco Keyzer did just that on a recent Monday morning. The music teacher had parked his bike outside the central station before heading to a class and returned to find it gone. "I can be mad, but that really wouldn't help me," he says. Sometimes people ride away without paying the required fee. Bruno Brand, who helps people find their bikes at AFAC, says people get mad, but he explains it is the local police, not him, who confiscated the bike.

Within the past four years, the city increased the fine for buying or selling a bike in the street. Punishment for stealing a bike is now up to three months in jail.

Danish and Dutch officials say their countries might have been more congested if protests in the 1970s and 1980s had not sparked the impetus for building bicycle-lane networks. The arguments for more biking were mostly about health and congestion -- only in the past year has the environment started to be a factor. Proponents of better infrastructure point to China as an example: In Beijing, where the economy has boomed, 30.3% of people commuted to work on bikes in 2005, down 8.2% from 2000, according to a survey by the Beijing Transportation Development Research Center and Beijing Municipal Committee of Communication.

Now, the Dansk Cyklist Forbund, the Danish Cyclist's Federation, says that to make progress it can't be too confrontational and must recognize that many bikers also have cars. "Our goal is the right means of transportation for the right trips," says director Jens Loft Rasmussen.

In comparison, the rules of the American road can take some adjustment, as Cheryl AndristPlourde has found when she visits her parents in Columbus, Ohio. Last summer, the Amsterdam resident enrolled her 8-year-old daughter in a camp close to her parents' house. The plan was for her daughter, who biked to school every day back home, to walk to camp. But her daughter whined about the 10-minute walk -- all the other kids drove, she said -- and the streets were too busy for her to bike. By the third day, Ms. AndristPlourde was driving her daughter to the camp.

Bike-Friendly Cities in the U.S.

A number of towns have recently focused on making roads more accessible to bicycles. Here are some of the top spots chosen by the Bicycle Friendly Community Campaign from the League of American Bicyclists, an advocacy group based in Washington, D.C.

CITY	% OF ARTERIAL ROADS WITH BIKE LANES	% OF COMMUTERS WHO BIKE	COMMENTS
Boulder, Colo.	97%	21%	Boulder has spent an average 15% of its transportation budget on building and maintaining bicycle traffic over the past five years. The goal is to create a system that's "equitable for all users," with no hierarchy among pedestrians, cars and bikes, says Marni Ratzel, who runs the city's program.
Chicago	11%	1-2%	Mayor Richard Michael Daley bikes to work, setting the example for this city, which released an ambitious new bike plan last year. The goal: making all of Chicago's streets safe and convenient for cycling.
Davis, Calif.	95%	17%	Mostly flat and temperate, this town's logo is a bicycle; it has more bikes than cars and is the only place to earn platinum status on Bicycle Friendly Community's list of top cities. The city is about to build a \$1.7 million bike-only tunnel under a major road.
Madison.	About 37%	3.2%	There are 32 miles of bike

Wisc.			lanes, 35 miles of bike paths and more than 100 miles of signed bike routes. On University Avenue, the major street in the downtown and University of Wisconsin campus area, there can be over 10,000 bicyclists a day - plus 30,000 cars.
Palo Alto, Calif.	13%	5.7%	Along with the bike lanes on roads, the city also has nine miles of bike paths. In 2004 it spent about \$5 million on a rail line under-crossing and \$1.5 million on a 0.8-mile bike path.
Portland, Ore.	28%	5.4%	Though there are lots of hills and rain, this city has 163 miles of bike lanes. All but two bridges accommodate bicyclists. There's still a long way to go: The city still has 38 miles of bike lanes left in order to achieve its master plan. But in some neighborhoods bike commuters are as high as 9%.
San Francisco	About 4%	2.1%	In November 2003, San Francisco voters approved a half-cent sales tax measure, estimated to total \$2.6 billion over 30 years. Of that, \$56 million (a little more than 2%) will go to bike-related projects.

Write to Nancy Keates at nancy.keates@wsj.com²

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