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Bike Lane Proposals Could Ease Traffic Accident Deaths

Throughout the United States, cities are experiencing an unprecedented increase in bicycle use. Fifty years after the country's major investment in an interstate highway system, many city dwellers are trying to take the streets back from vehicles with traffic proposals designed to improve safety and congestion for cyclists and pedestrians. Many of these proposals, which have spread like a wave through California, advocate the creation of new bicycle lanes at the expense of parking spaces and vehicle lanes. Many residents oppose these plans in fear that they will lead to an increase in traffic congestion, but recent studies have shown that similar bike-friendly programs have reduced accident deaths for cyclists and motorists alike.

Nearly a dozen cities throughout California are considering "complete streets" initiatives that will prioritize bicycle and pedestrian traffic over existing vehicle lanes. Santa Clara, for one, has already started construction on a project that will replace one car lane on Pruneridge Avenue with a bicycle lane, to the chagrin of some commuters. Calling the plan "completely nuts," Santa Clara resident Santo Rao said that "a slow-moving car can block up the entire road," thanks to the new plan. "While China is busy building up future infrastructure to dominate the world, here we have harebrained folks doing the opposite, taking us back to one-lane roads."

Others view the move not as a step backward, but as a natural progression in a world that no longer needs to be dependant on vehicles. "By designing and building more complete streets, people are able to choose to walk, drive, bicycle or take transit," said Chadrick Smalley, a Richmond development project manager. "Streets that are designed solely for automobile travel often do not feasibly permit that choice to be made and, instead, force people to drive."

But the most important benefit of the complete streets proposals is their potential to reduce traffic deaths for cyclists, pedestrians, and motorists alike. A recent study published in the journal Environmental Practice found that the most bike-friendly cities report the lowest rate of bike accident deaths. Cities with many cyclists, for example, reported 2.5 bike deaths per 100,000 residents, compared to 9 deaths per 100,000 people in low bike traffic cities. And by promoting a "share the road" attitude among all commuters, city officials have predicted that the projects will also help to reduce traffic fatalities for pedestrians and motorists.

Complete streets projects have enormous potential to increase traffic efficiency and reduce traffic accident deaths. But in order for them to be successful, city officials should improve outreach skills to minimize public opposition to these measures that have such clear potential.

More Information:

<http://www.gjel.com/news/traffic-deaths-by-vehicle-type-in-california-and-nationwide.html>

<http://www.gjel.com/blog/bay-area-bike-lanes-california-car-accidents.html>

<http://www.gjel.com/blog/bike-lanes-oak-fell-san-francisco-bicycle-accidents.html>