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Editor's Notebook: Commute by bicycle: Why aren't more doing it?



Written by Bruce Barton
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I've been reading articles on people making changes in reaction to astronomical gas prices. Changes in travel plans. Fewer trips. Combining several shopping chores at one time instead of individual trips that waste gas. Switching to "Smart Cars" that get more gasoline bang for the buck.

But for all the supposed interest in cycling around here, I have yet to observe a noticeable hike in the number of two-wheelers traveling the bike lanes. It's apparently a gas-free travel option that's a bit too inconvenient.

I've been commuting to work on a bike for about a month now. And I can't believe I didn't start years ago.

The benefits are obvious. Exercise. Clean travel. Reducing your carbon footprint, as they say in "green" lingo. And, sadly, another benefit: a lack of competing bike commute traffic on the road.

The drawbacks are there, too. The hazards of competing for road space with multiton minivans and SUVs. The noise and pollution from said vehicles.

Then there are the bicyclist vs. motorist wars. There are plenty of drivers who aren't particularly sensitive to cyclists. Likewise, motorists need to watch for "bad driver" cyclists who ignore stop signs and occupy road space where the cars should be. I'm doing my best not to be one of them.

Still, I'm enjoying the commute by bike, especially with the great summer weather.

In California, we have the best bike routes in the world. I was talking with my intern friend Scott Bland, a far more seasoned cyclist than I, who hails from New York and recently traveled in England. There's no comparison, he says.

Certainly, many people have to travel great distances to get to work, so cycling isn't very practical. And a big advantage for me is that I live close to work. It's a straight shot down Cuesta Drive for me to downtown Los Altos. Hardly challenging or time-consuming.

But I'm convinced a great many people could be cycling to work and are simply not doing it.

I saw only one other cyclist on Cuesta this morning, amid a steady stream of cars. Scott rides Foothill Expressway, a far busier route, and saw just five cyclists during his 5-mile commute.

2005 U.S. Census numbers from the American Community Survey bear out the lack of bike commuters. Nationwide, 0.4 percent of people commute regularly by bike. Meanwhile, 77 percent commute by car – by themselves. (The 2005 ACS estimates were based on an annual, nationwide household sample of about 250,000 addresses per month.)

I'm reminded of that old Neil Young song, "Rockin' in the Free World," and the line, "Got fuel to burn, got roads to drive." As long as we have these, the car will remain the commute vehicle of choice, no matter how high gas goes up, no matter how much "green" awareness we acquire. And Silicon Valley will remain L.A. North.

I hope more people will do what I recently did: Look in the mirror and say, "What are you doing? Leave the car in the driveway."

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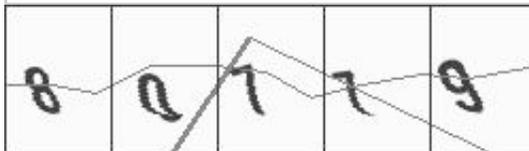
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