



Dozens of Critical Mass participants ride through the streets of Lansing, Mich.



Taking it to the Streets

Hey you, get out of the road!” shouts a perturbed motorist at a mob of jovial bicyclers. A cyclist shouts back, “We’re not blocking traffic; we are traffic!”

A cacophony of bells, gears and other musical implements of clatter reverberate throughout the campus of Michigan State University.

It’s the last Friday of the month, and dozens of MSU students and East Lansing bike-enthusiasts are riding in Critical Mass, a part-celebration, part-political statement, part-mosh-pit-on-wheels.

It’s a movement that began fifteen years ago in San Francisco as a way to show how unfriendly the roads are for cyclists as a result of suburban sprawl, and is now observed in cities all over the world.

“It’s a great example of the community coming together for a common goal—and to have fun!” said Marci Baranski, an MSU junior and enthusiastic Critical Mass participant.

The monthly event is just one example of ‘biketivism’—advocacy for bike-positive developments to city infrastructure.

With smart growth increasingly embraced throughout the U.S., many communities have been fervently transforming their cities into bikeopolises: chock-full of wide, comfortable bike-lanes and elaborate municipal bicycle rental/repair facilities.

WHAT IS A BICYCLE-FRIENDLY COMMUNITY?

The League of American Bicyclists has a “bicycle-friendly community” campaign that awards neighborhoods that go the distance in bike-advocacy. They evaluate cities for engineering, education, encouragement, enforcement, evaluation and planning. A city that earns success in any category is eligible for a medal. The organization lists 64 communities that have made enough improvements to their non-motorized infrastructure to earn an award. Ann Arbor is the only city in Michigan to win a medal.

Wendy Rampson, an Ann Arbor city planner, said the city became more bike-friendly to improve transportation. “Much of the focus has been on bicycle travel, since that’s the area that needed the most improvement,” said Rampson.

Since its progressive, bicycle-friendly revitalization, the city’s “cycle route” symbols have become ubiquitous, making commuting for Ann Arbor bicyclists much easier.

So far only one city has earned the League of Bicyclists’s top bicycle-friendly community award: Davis, Calif. Considered by many to be the bicycle Mecca of America, Davis is so bike-conscious that its own town logo is a bicycle.

“They have such a rich bicycle culture going back 40 years,” said Bill Nesper, director of the bicycle-friendly community campaign. “Things are done completely different in Davis. It’s mind-boggling what they have built into their city. They even have a bike-valet service!”

A staggering 17 percent of Davis residents bike to work, though Nesper says that statistic is probably higher. For many Davis

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Suburban sprawl is taking over the streets, but some bicyclists are fighting back by demanding bike-friendly communities.

STORY BY JAMES CRUGNALE

PHOTOS BY JAE YOOL JOO

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Critical Mass participants meet every month at Ranney Skate Park in Lansing, Mich. to promote bicycle-friendly communities.

residents, Critical Mass is a daily occurrence.

According to Tim Potter, marketing and sales coordinator at MSU Bikes (a bike retailer), Davis's bike-cred has made it a cool city that people want to visit.

"For a community like Davis, they're the ultimate," said Potter. "They pride themselves on being the city with the first bike lanes in America."

Transforming neighborhoods into bike-friendly communities can also have a tremendously constructive impact for the lives of ordinary citizens. Consider:

- A 1978 study in Boulder, Colo. showed that the average value of homes adjacent to bikeable "greenbelts" was 32 percent higher than those 3,200 feet away.

- A 2000 Urban Land Institute study said that homebuyers were willing to pay \$21,189 more for houses in bikeable cities.

- A study by the Journal of Internal Medicine in 2000 found that areas in which citizens commuted an average of three hours per week by bike decreased risk of mortality by about 40 percent.

- A 2001-2002 study by Atlanta transportation research group SMARTRAQ found that people in bikeable communities were 7 percent less likely to be obese.

- The Worldwatch Institute reported that a short, four-mile round trip by bicycle keeps about 15 pounds of pollutants out of the air.

ROADBLOCKS

Making a pro-bicycle change in a community can be tumultuous and time-consuming. It can even set off a citizen outcry.

East Lansing's controversial Hagadorn Road conversion plans—changing a four-lane thoroughfare into a three-lane street with a

bike-lane—languished in committee for two years before the city council considered it. Many city residents vehemently spoke out against the proposal.

People were opposed to being slowed down by cyclists and inconvenienced, explained Potter. Michigan loves its vehicles and "residents who spoke against the road changes were very ingrained in the belief that East Lansing is an automobile town and that's the way it's going to be."

Ultimately, the city council voted unanimously to leave the road the way it was.

"The consensus of the council was that the changes would probably cause more disruption," said Kevin Beard, an East Lansing city council member.

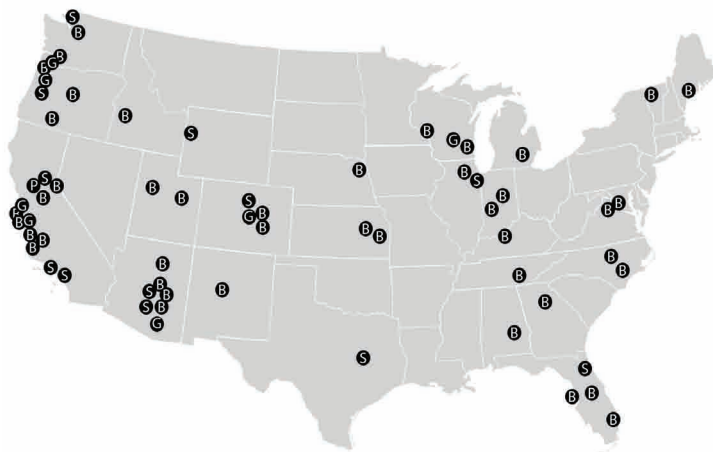
Traffic on Hagadorn often exceeds 18,000 vehicles a day, something that a three-lane configuration just wouldn't be able to handle, Beard said. "As a matter of practicality, I didn't think it made sense to incur the costs of something with short term gain or value."

Despite his vote against the plan for Hagadorn, Beard favors improving the city's infrastructure for bicycles.

He cites lack of safe, designated routes for commuting and bike lanes that virtually disappear halfway through a route as reasons for an improved system. "Our current system comes up short," said Beard.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Despite the opposition, plans are in the works to begin the application process for a bicycle friendly community certification for East Lansing. At the August meeting of Lansing's Walking &



A United States map detailing the 64 cities that have won a distinction as a bicycle-friendly community. Platinum is the highest rating that a community can receive.

Bicycling Task Force, community leaders suggested having East Lansing apply next year to become a certified bicycle-friendly community, according to Dick Janson, president of Mid-Michigan’s Tri-County Bicycle Association. Everyone in attendance eagerly supported the idea, a good sign considering that the application process is lengthy.

“The award from the League of American Bicyclists does not drop in from the sky,” said Janson. “Someone needs to campaign for it.”

He added, “there is at least a year’s worth of work before we can even be ready to apply.”

Beard agrees. “It’s not easy to retrofit your community,” he said. “It’s a long process; it’s going to take a lot of thought and a

lot of data.”

Given Michigan State University’s enormous campus and abundance of bike paths, a friendly bicycling community seems an ideal fit for students.

MSU junior Corrinne Thomas said much more needs to be done to ensure the safety of bicycle and pedestrian commuters.

“There needs to be better labeling for the bike paths,” Thomas said. “If there were better visible, physical signs, that would help a lot.”

More visible paths and larger bike areas may also reduce the crashes between pedestrians and bicyclists. Collisions are so prevalent on campus that some students have made Facebook groups chronicling the frequent accidents that occur at MSU. MSU Junior Danica Whitfield is a member of the “I got hit by a bike/ watched helplessly as my friend got run over” group.

“There’s just a bunch of bikers in their own little world,” said Whitfield. “I bet there are more bike accidents at MSU in a day than car accident(s) in the state of Michigan!”

Baranski said there is a lot that MSU and East Lansing can do to improve their bicycling issues just by involving students in the civic process. “I’m sure a lot of MSU students would want to help out in a bicycling task force,” Baranski said. “Students in general also need a better understanding of what’s expected of them.

That includes keeping pedestrians out of bike lanes, a practice that often results in collisions between cyclists and walkers.

Despite these concerns, Nesper hopes that East Lansing achieves the distinction from his organization.

“(While) East Lansing has not applied for the Bicycle Friendly Community award. I hope that they do in the future!” Nesper said. 🌍

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