

Portland Bicycle Advisory Committee

Working to Make Bicycling a Part of Daily Life in Portland

1001 SW 5th Avenue, Room 1300
Portland OR 97204



May 2, 2023

To: Commissioner Mingus Mapps
Commissioner Carmen Rubio
Interim PBOT Director Tara Wasiak
Interim BES Director Dawn Uchiyama
BPS Director Donnie Oliveira

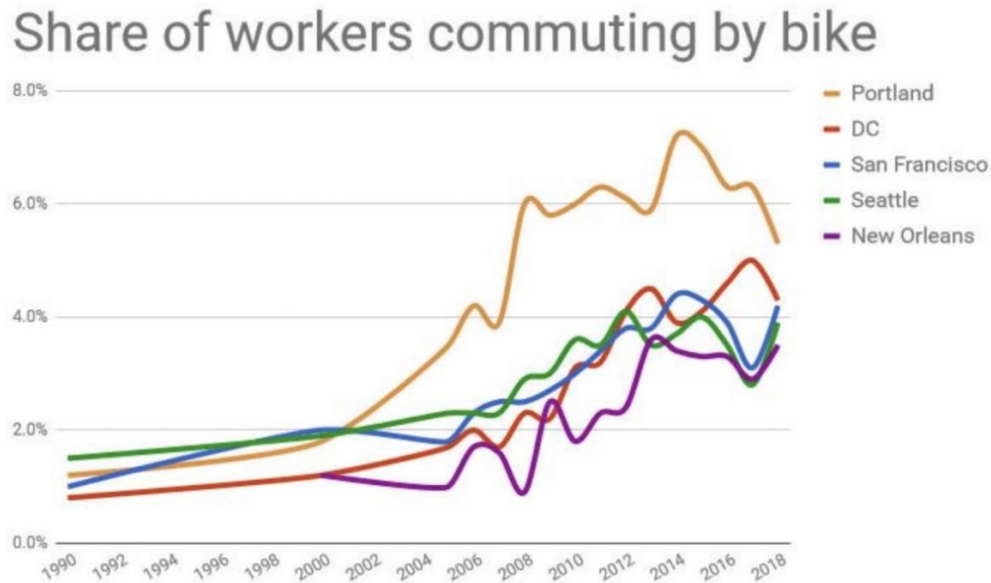
Subject: The City of Portland must reverse the Decline of Bicycle Ridership

For decades, people have moved to Portland in droves in search of a higher quality of life. Many are drawn here by the allure of making bicycling part of their daily existence. That's because Portland is known throughout the United States for its leadership in bicycle infrastructure, bicycle culture and bicycle joy. Some ride for the joy, others for the health and/or climate benefits, and more still because it is an affordable alternative to owning a car.

Bicycling is a key part of creating the quality of life that Portland offers. It is a powerful and demonstrably effective tool to realize the City's desired outcomes as envisioned by the Comprehensive Plan (as well as a key guiding principle in the Transportation System Plan):

- **Equity** - Transportation cost burden disproportionately affects people with low incomes who are more likely to be from communities marginalized by government structures and institutions. These are also the communities historically harmed by the construction of highways and more recently harmed by environmental impacts from air toxics and greenhouse gasses emitted by cars and trucks on highways and throughways.
- **Economic prosperity** - Studies have shown that the human scale of bicycling, promoting more interaction with the streetscape, benefits business.¹ Projects for people walking and bicycling have created measurable economic gains for nearby retail and food businesses and are a major draw for employees of larger companies (e.g., Nike). During the City's bicycling's peak in 2014-15, there was significant benefit for the City in minimizing the potential for car traffic congestion as Portland's population grew.
- **Human health** - Since the 1990s the Center for Disease Control has advocated for safe pedestrian- and bicycling-friendly design to encourage daily activity in prevention of diabetes, heart disease, depression and anxiety, certain types of cancer and more.
- **Environmental health** - Transportation contributes more than 40% of greenhouse gas emissions in Multnomah County. The current goal is to reach 45% below 1990 emissions levels by 2035. There is no transportation more "low-carbon" than bicycling and walking.
- **Resiliency** - As demonstrated by Multnomah County's recent Earthquake Ready Burnside Bridge project, bicycles will play a prominent role in disaster response and community and economic recovery.

¹ Metro. 2022. Active Transportation Return on Investment Study. <https://www.oregonmetro.gov/active-transportation-return-investment-study>



(Chart: Michael Andersen)

Portland's great success in promoting bicycle use has been largely due to a concerted effort to build high quality bikeways. But this formerly successful strategy has not been working for nearly ten years - measured commuter bicycle ridership in the city has been declining since 2014. **We are very concerned about this. The City should be too. But is it?**

There are two key questions here. The first is: do you—our city and agency leaders—still have a commitment to reducing automobile trips and do you still see bicycle transportation as a key strategy in achieving that? The second is: **how do we reverse the trend?** When similar circumstances developed with transit use, the City identified key barriers (such as reliability, access, delay and safety) and created a new approach to reverse the decline. This led to the very successful "Enhanced Transit Corridors Plan" and the Rose Lane project. We ask for similar strategic treatment for bicycle transportation.

We ask you to direct PBOT to look deeper into the decline to fully understand its causes and then develop and implement a strategy that includes actions for the City to take to reverse the decline. We ask that the following be considered:

- Could more data on bicycle use and users today help answer the question? There are many theories and reasons about why bicycle use has declined. We've engaged in and followed many conversations on this topic but we don't believe anybody currently working on this issue has a firm grasp of how all those reasons have interacted to reduce bicycle use. It would be helpful to know why people who formerly rode bicycles are switching to other modes of transportation and why bicycling is not being taken up by those arriving in Portland. It would also be helpful to know if this trend is the same for all types of trips: to work, to restaurants, to school or running errands as we saw variation by trip type during the pandemic. It would also be helpful to know if this trend is the same across demographics (e.g., youth, low-income riders) or types of people bicycling or using new mobility (e.g., interested but concerned riders, other emerging mobility technologies). We need data representing all people who did, do, and could ride bicycles.

- Are there lessons to be learned from other places? As shown in the chart above, bicycling had been increasing in Seattle, San Francisco and New Orleans while it was declining in Portland. There are many other examples from cities in North America and around the world. What have they done/are they doing that could be applied to Portland?

What are international best practices to increase bicycle use?

- What will the City do to make roadways safe for vulnerable roadway users? We know from experience that safety is a factor. Driving and speeding are too easy in Portland and driver behavior is getting worse - these days expressing bicycle joy through a group ride is often met with an act of vehicular violence. Deaths caused by people driving are preventable and harm our most vulnerable communities. The 2022 Vision Zero Deadly Crash Report indicates that traffic deaths are at a record-high for another year - in stark opposition to the program's goal. The current approach is not working. Red light cameras, speed cameras are needed for enforcement; street lighting in dark corridors and daylighting at intersections are known countermeasures that improve safety.
- Are we ready to recognize meeting our goals means truly shifting the status quo? Driving in Portland is too easy. Riding a bicycle, walking and taking transit for many people in the city is not very easy. Beyond more, protected and well-maintained bicycling facilities, safe and secure bicycle parking at home and at destinations is also critical. Recommendations must include more strategies reducing barriers to bicycling, as well as pricing and/or repurposing lane and parking space reserved for cars to benefit more vulnerable people using the roadway. How do we realize Portland's policy to "make bicycling more attractive than driving"?
- How can we restore a city culture that celebrates bicycling? We know that more people bicycling makes conditions better for people bicycling (and everyone on the roadway). How do we create a virtuous circle and create some initial activation for more bicycling? We need to encourage, welcome, and embolden Portlanders to ride bikes, take transit, and walk everywhere in the city. Hosting temporary (or establishing permanent) street closures to cars helps reclaim space for other people using the roadway and generate excitement. Many organizations in Portland are attempting to inspire a shared vision of climate action, make progress on vision zero, and shift to a culture that celebrates bicycling and walking. Pursuing partnerships with local community and advocacy organizations can further incentivize use of healthy, sustainable choices, especially riding a bicycle.

We request that this strategy be complete in time to incorporate the recommendations into FY 2024-25 budget requests. It appears that there are only a few line items in PBOT's proposed FY 2023-24 budget that will move the needle in encouraging people to ride a bicycle. PBOT's recent budget request indicates that we are in a "state of revenue crisis." But the bureau also maintains its focus to make "progress on its strategic plan and transportation justice goals..." And in the face of all of this, Portland has a goal of 25% bicycle ridership by 2030. The requested budget states: "PBOT's Transportation System Plan (TSP) envisions a wholesale shift from trips by car to other modes of travel, but people cannot reasonably be expected to make these changes if streets are deadly or youth can't walk or bike safely to school. Failure to offer realistic transportation alternatives means more congestion and its resulting effect on our economy, personal health, and carbon emissions." We agree. We should not be asking PBOT for budget cuts, nor enabling higher interagency costs, while also expecting PBOT to shift trips. Our city needs PBOT to do more than build - PBOT must be supported as a catalyst for change.

We are looking to your leadership in catalyzing a strategic plan to return bicycle transportation to its former enviable and desired trajectory and create the conditions that make it easier to choose a bicycle rather than a car. We look forward to working together in reversing the trend of declining bicycle use and taking action to challenge the status quo, reduce car convenience, and champion the Council-approved, modal hierarchy. This is critical to Portland's success in minimizing our contributions to climate change and in moving us toward a healthier, safer future in a livable city.

Respectfully,



Ally Holmqvist
BAC Chair



Joseph Perez
BAC Vice Chair

References (if necessary)

<https://bikeportland.org/2022/08/12/portland-based-ride-app-relaunches-hopes-to-amplify-e-bike-boom-361479>

<https://bikeportland.org/2022/08/05/psu-researchers-data-fusion-can-help-cities-count-bikes-better-361046>

[BIKETOWN ridership surges past half a million rides, shattering prior annual record in just nine months | Portland.gov](#)

[City of Portland | Micromobility Dashboard \(ridereport.com\)](#)

<https://www.portland.gov/transportation/vision-zero/documents/vision-zero-portland-2022-deadly-traffic-crash-report/download>