

Anti-war? Take to the streets!

In honor of Bike to Work Week, *The New Mexican's* lead story on a Sunday last month featured the happy, healthy headshot of a veteran reporter. The caption boasted of his five-year history of biking to work, and much of the article promoted an array of bike-related events. Since biking is arguably more permacultural than walking (because biking is more efficient from a calorie-used per distance-traveled perspective), one might think that an eco-freak like me would have been thrilled with the coverage.

Unfortunately, the article cut a deep ditch across the path toward a safer local biking scene. By describing himself so publicly as a sidewalk-cyclist, the reporter's tacit endorsement of this dangerous technique will probably be the indirect cause of numerous accidents, and it could take many years for our community to fully erase the thought that cycling on sidewalks might be safer than cycling in the street. It's not.

The pace of the sidewalk is that of the pedestrian. It's not the pace of bikes. This is particularly important from a visibility standpoint.

Driveways, sidewalk intersections, and the junction between sidewalk and street all become extremely accident-prone places when cyclists take to them at commuter-velocities. Drivers, pedestrians, and other cyclists cannot see sidewalk-cyclists concealed behind walls, fences, signage, hillsides, plants, trees, cars, trucks, buses, and much more. When I cycle I want to be as visible as possible. I wear bright colors, use lights and reflectors at night, and make myself (and my intentions) obvious in ways ranging from friendly gestures to horn-blowing.

Cycling on the sidewalk is unsafe even where visibility is not an issue. Drivers and pedestrians expect fast moving vehicles to be segregated from folks on foot, and they imagine sidewalks free of traffic. Because of these expectations, the human brain will



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in the pedestrian zone. We'll simply see a human form, imagine a slow moving object, pull out of a driveway, and maybe introduce you to your maker.

Sidewalks are also bad places to ride for a number of geomorphic reasons, especially in a city as old as Santa Fe. Concrete surfaces often become too narrow for bikes as walls meet curbs, telephone poles are erected in the middle of sidewalks, or plant material takes off in wet years like this. Sidewalks are also typically much bumpier, irregular, unpredictable and generally more dodgy than asphalt streets because their upkeep is often the responsibility of individual landowners.

Ask anyone at your local bike shop. They'll tell you something similar to what Mike McCalla at New Mexico Bike and Sport said when I asked him what he thought of sidewalk-cycling: "It's almost never a good idea."

Taking your bike to the street might require a little more caution and courage than driving a car down Cerrillos Road - but not much. These days, all it takes for me is the thought of Iraq and my natural desire to feel less responsible for the chaos and carnage that my representative government has created there.

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