

Veto crushes bike-safety bill

One of permaculture's easiest principles to accept is the one that says, "Make the least change for the greatest possible effect." Known as the work-is-pollution principle, its goal (of being productive without wasting energy) makes sense.

New Mexico's governor had a chance to apply this conservative principle by signing SB 124, but she vetoed it. Senator Peter Wirth's bill would have made it illegal for motor vehicles to pass bicycles without providing a five-foot buffer. It would have cost nothing and would have reduced expenditures for bike-related accidents and brought more bicycle-tourist dollars to the state.

Passage also would have encouraged more people to use bicycles for commuting. In addition to helping people save money on gas, this would have freed up space on roads and reduced the long-term costs of highway repair. Most important, "five feet to pass" would have told drivers what's safe.

In a terse statement, Governor Susana Martinez said she vetoed SB 124 because "Current law already provides penalties for careless driving. NMSA § 66-8-114(B) states that, 'Any person who operates a vehicle in a careless, inattentive or imprudent manner, without due regard for the width, grade, curves, corners, traffic, weather and road conditions and all other attendant circumstances is guilty of a misdemeanor.'

"I feel," she wrote in Senate Executive Message No. 49, "existing law already addresses the criminality of endangering cyclists in our state."

Using the governor's logic, there should be no need for speed limits or drunk-driving laws. We could put my eight-year-old son behind the wheel if he's not "careless."

But laws often educate. They tell people how fast is too fast, how much booze is too much booze, and how young is too young. Similarly, we could easily decide how close is too close when passing a scantily clad cyclist with a fast mass of metal.



Since the governor understands this, she forces us to consider what her real motives are. In the wake of Fukushima, an alien (from outer space) might think that our leaders would do more for cyclists, since they use alternative energy — but anyone who followed the legislative session knows Martinez has little use for anything that might protect the planet for future generations. Fortunately, we don't have to get anywhere near five feet from her to know who got Martinez elected. It was the oil and gas industry, and they don't make a dime when someone hops on a bike.

Cyclists save money on gas and other expenses when they bike to work, school, church, and shopping. They also save time and money by not having to go to the gym. They're in better shape than the average person behind the wheel of a car, so their health costs are typically lower.

Talk about making the least change for the greatest possible effect. Bike commuters live by this motto every day. If more of us were to get out there and join them, maybe one day our leaders would realize how easy it is to make positive and productive changes.

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