



John Pucher, Rutgers professor and scholar of bike safety and bikeable cities, rides down Dexter Avenue North with Robin Randels, of Seattle, during a recent visit. Though Pucher liked Dexter, he said Seattle is falling behind in creating safe routes, especially downtown.

Worse than Manhattan? Bike expert rattled by ride through city

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Residential neighborhoods are bike friendly, but Seattle is falling behind its peers in creating safe routes, especially downtown, says Rutgers professor John Pucher.

Rutgers professor John Pucher, a scholar and evangelist for bicycle-friendly cities, didn't think anyplace in Cascadia would match the harrowing streets of the Big Apple.

Then he rode Seattle's Second Avenue bike lane.

Close encounters of the wrong kind greeted him down the southbound slope: a woman texting while her SUV drifted toward him; a FedEx delivery truck blocking; cars headed toward Interstate 5 turning in front of him at intersections; a black sedan whose driver abruptly stopped to parallel park.

Fellow rider Robin Randels, a professional bike-safety trainer who trailed Pucher, quivered when the ride ended at a Pioneer Square cafe, as the adrenaline wore off.

"I'd say it's as bad as a major avenue on Manhattan," Pucher said. "I think it's maybe even worse, because I think here, there's more left and right turns, there's more doors that are being opened, more cars that are trying to park."

City data show 56 bicycle crashes reported to police in that corridor from 2007 to 2012.

"I think there's only one solution there," said Pucher, "and that is to put in a cycle track."

A cycle track is a lane separated from motor vehicles by a row of parked cars, curbs or plantings. The city's first cycle track officially opens next month in the Bitter Lake area along Linden Avenue North, though a similar layout exists near Alki Beach. A cycle track is under construction on Broadway as part of the First Hill Streetcar project, to open in 2014. A proposed track along west Lake Union is being studied. And Amazon.com plans to build a cycle track on Seventh Avenue near its three future towers.

Pucher, 62, was the keynote speaker last week at Bicycle Urbanism Symposium at the University of Washington, which is itself planning a potential \$16 million expansion of its popular Burke-Gilman Trail segment through campus. He coedited a new book, "City Cycling," which covers such issues as how women are the indicator for pleasant cycling conditions. Surveys show women are more fearful than men of passing cars.

Pucher told 160 listeners that his trip down the left side of Second Avenue “was death-defying. I almost got killed five or six times.”

But any cycle-track project faces obstacles. Downtown has just five major through streets, so tight that converting even one lane from autos to bicycles would cause a spat. Streetcars are being proposed, maybe on First Avenue. Adding to the pressure, buses will eventually need more space when the Highway 99 tunnel removes access via the Alaskan Way Viaduct, and when light-rail trains to Northgate oust buses from the downtown transit tunnel.

Pucher replies that the city should then make space for cycle tracks on two streets and there will still be three for cars. “But give us at least one.”

Seattle’s draft Bicycle Master Plan update proposes cycle tracks on Second and Fourth avenues. The City Council has budgeted \$150,000 to reach 30 percent design for a downtown route. The planning should start in 2014, said Dongho Chang, traffic engineer for the Seattle Department of Transportation. One mile of downtown corridor might cost \$3 million to build, based on experience in Vancouver, B.C., he said.

Cycle tracks create a risk that bikes will emerge from protected lanes into traffic at intersections. Pucher said Vancouver is handling that problem by giving cyclists an early green light, so they move through the crossings first. Dutch cities install novel curbing that channels both drivers and cyclists toward cornering angles where they see each other.

Ten years ago Seattle was in the forefront of bicycle politics, but the city is so slow to get projects moving that it’s falling behind Minneapolis, Portland, Vancouver, Chicago, even Austin, he said.

In 1990, about 1.5 percent of Seattleites bicycled to work or school, compared with 1.1 percent in Portland. By 2011, Seattle had climbed slowly to 3.7 percent, while Portland zoomed to a 6.8 percent commute share for cycling, census surveys show. “I hope this is a wake-up call to Seattle” to build safe routes now and not in a decade, he said.

After a four-hour ride through side streets, Pucher was impressed by Seattle’s move toward neighborhood greenways. Greenways contain speed bumps, way-finding signs, 20 mph limits, trees, and bioswales that filter runoff water using grasses or bushes.

A greenway conversion is under way at Northwest 58th Street in Ballard. Pucher rode last week with Randels, who works for the Cascade Bicycle Club, and is on the Board of Seattle Neighborhood Greenways. Randels said greenways can attract children, who are the “future riders,” as well as make it possible for seniors to maintain fitness and independence.

Seattle “is almost there” with greenways, Pucher said. The city has installed hundreds of traffic-slowing circles at intersections, so it shouldn’t take huge dollars to upgrade normal side streets to greenways, he said.

Pucher also liked Dexter Avenue North, among the state’s busiest bike-commute streets. Dexter was retrofitted during a 2011 repaving project so that buses stop in the travel lane, and bike lanes run to the right of several new bus stops. The Dutch were building streets like that 30 years ago, he said.

But he criticized Seattle’s “sharrows,” those ubiquitous icons on the pavement that encourage users to share the road. They’re confusing, and should be reserved for greenways, Pucher said.

Road pavement in Seattle is as bad as anything in New Jersey, he said after coasting down from Phinney Ridge. At a lunch at SDOT headquarters, he urged city staff to work on it.



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