



San Antonio's Drive Toward Safe Cycling

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By *Robert Rivard*



There is much more to making San Antonio a safe cycling city debate than getting riders to use bike helmets, although my June 10 article, "[The Bike Helmet Dilemma: Freedom and Choice vs. Safety](#)," provoked strong responses from riders on both sides of the argument.

I doubt I changed any minds. Both camps, however, probably agree on other measures that can make San Antonio a safer place to cycle. There's a good chance your city council representative and your county commissioner do not cycle or even own a bike, so get active if you want to see change. It won't happen by itself. One good option is to join [Bike Texas](#), the state's leading non-profit cycling advocacy organization.

Safety in Numbers

The very visible growth in cycling is good for a lot of reasons, one of which is the safety of cyclists. The more people on bikes, the greater their visibility when cycling in urban traffic or on busy roadways. Motorists, meanwhile, are becoming more accustomed to sharing the road with cyclists as the biking community continues to grow. Okay, make that most motorists. Elected officials and law enforcement, who were slow to embrace the cycling movement, now are responding much more positively with public policy changes that favor cycling safety and growth.

Experienced cyclists who train and ride with a team, club or at casual meet-ups know that it feels much safer to be riding in a cohesive pack. Riding solo on streets without a defined bike lane makes a solitary rider feel more vulnerable to a speeding commuter or distracted driver working a cell phone.

The safest place to ride, of course, is where there aren't any vehicles, such as the Mission Trail. But that's very limited mileage, suitable for a recreational ride but not serious distance work.

Riding in groups, especially at night, also heightens visibility if every bike has front and back lights, required by state and local law.



Racers round a corner while riding during an underground, nighttime bike criterium (a short, timed route – winner makes the most laps). Photo by David Rangel.

Group riders can avoid antagonizing faster-moving vehicles by riding single file to allow vehicles to pass. I've seen cyclists refuse to yield in such circumstances, citing their own legal right to the road. Cyclists do have a right to be on the road, but [state law](#) includes this proviso: "Bicyclists may ride side by side so long as it does not prevent the reasonable flow of traffic." The "[share the road](#)" campaign applies to everyone on the road, motorists and cyclists alike. Attention, slow pokes: If cyclists are moving at a speed below the speed limit, they are required to yield to vehicle traffic. Yielding is also good PR for building better motorist-cyclist détente.

Cyclists know that motorists are hyper-sensitive to cyclists drifting through an empty intersection, or pausing at a stop sign when there is no traffic. The same vehicle drivers, of course, routinely exceed speed limits, make turns without using their turn signals, and change lanes on streets and expressways without warning. If every cyclist on the road consciously broke traffic laws they still couldn't come even close to the number of laws being broken at the same time by motorists, but that doesn't alter the dynamic. Cyclists who disobey traffic laws in front of motorists inflame the issue.

Ask the Boss to Start a Company B-cycle Program

San Antonio employers of all sizes can adopt a practice taking root in other cities with bike share programs by offering workers free or subsidized annual memberships to [B-cycle](#). The cost is minimal, and the payoff is happier workers getting more exercise and leaving their cars parked when they go to lunch or commute to and from work.

Corporate bike share programs also helps build bike mass on urban core streets, reducing traffic and



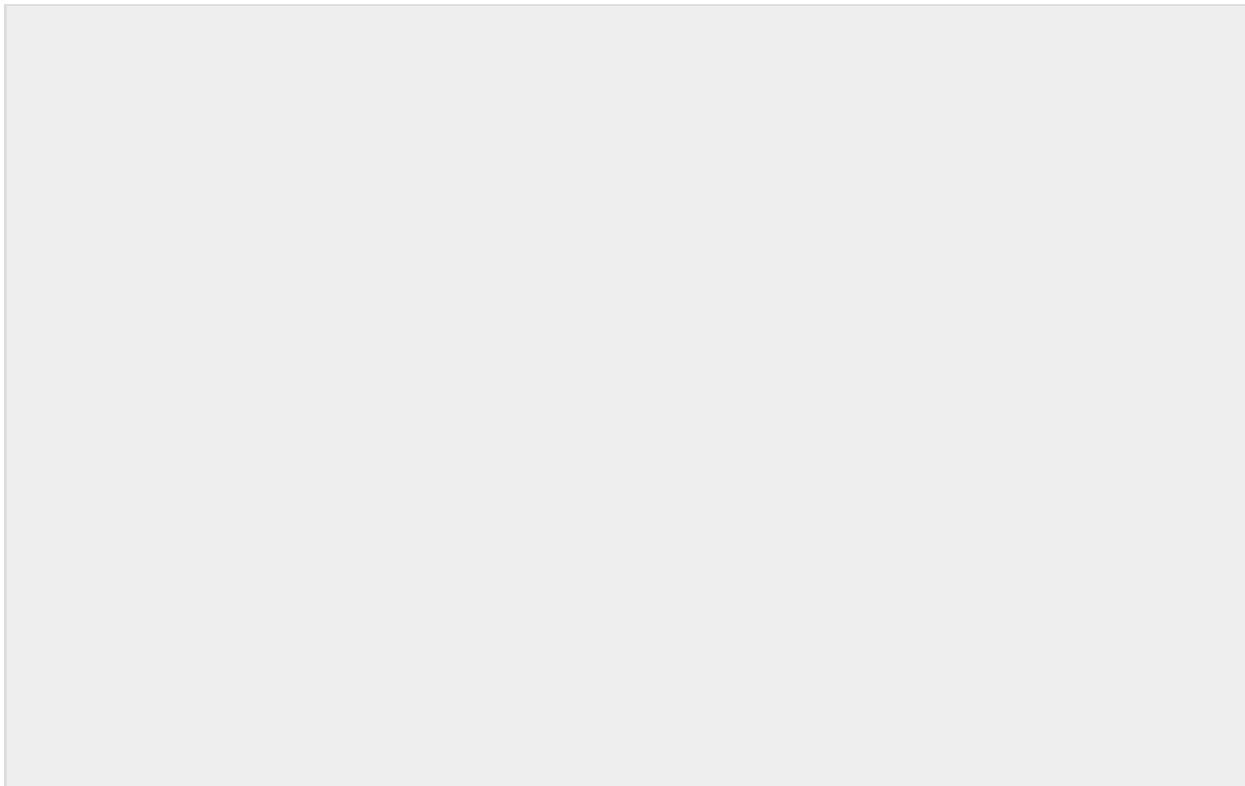
The Pearl Brewery's B-cycle station. Photo by Tom Trevino.

emissions. The City of San Antonio has offered employee discounts on memberships, which are \$60 a year for an adult and \$48 for students and seniors. Now in its third year, B-cycle has grown to a network of 42 stations with 355 bikes. By the end of summer there will be 50 stations with 450 bikes.

Lower Speed Limits

Nothing has more of a positive impact on safe cycling than slowing down vehicles.

“If a cyclist gets hit by an automobile going 40 mph you’re probably a fatality, with or without a bike helmet,” said Robin Stallings, executive director of Bike Texas. “At 30 mph, wearing a helmet, you’ll survive. At 20 mph, cars have time to stop and accidents don’t happen or happen a lot less often. Slow down cars and you’ll have a lot fewer fatalities.”





Mayor Julián Castro (center) and Police Chief William McManus (right) appear at a press conference for Monica Caban, an injured cyclist whose accident helped spur the safe passage ordinance and SAPD sting program. Photo by Iris Dimmick

[Educating motorists](#) is essential, beginning when teenagers earn their driver's license and later, along roadways wherever motorized vehicles and cyclists meet. Cyclists have the same legal right to the roadway as motorists.

The City of San Antonio's Office of Sustainability is running an outreach campaign called, "[There's Enough Road to Go Around](#)" (see video below). The department also maintains a Facebook page, [San Antonio Bikes](#), that offers education and safety resources and links, including programs for parents who want to teach their children safe cycling.

“Lower speed limits definitely enhance safety for vulnerable road users, but it’s a balancing act to make sure that all forms of traffic have an acceptable ‘level of service,’” said Julia Murphy, who manages the San Antonio Bikes program for the City. “It has to be a street by street consideration looking at the purpose of the thoroughfare and surrounding land uses, for example.”

Cyclists can do their part by riding in the right lane of a two-lane roadway in a manner that does not antagonize drivers by preventing them from safely passing. Riding in the left lane, weaving through lanes, running red lights and stop signs, all serve to alienate vehicle operators, especially those who don’t recognize a cyclist’s legal right to the road.

Drivers who express their anger by rapidly accelerating by cyclists, blasting their horns, or brushing back cyclists should know that sort of road rage is illegal. Undercover bike cops do move around the city at times to ensure motorists stay at least three feet away from cyclists at all times.

Here is a [video on driver education and motorist-bicyclist safety](#) posted on the www.bicyclinginfo.org website: A video can be viewed [here](#).

Bike Lanes Done Right



This Mulberry Avenue bike lane is too narrow to offer cyclists a safe space from passing vehicles. Photo courtesy of COSA/Office of Sustainability

Separating vehicles and cyclists wherever possible also makes sense.

San Antonio has increased the miles of bike lanes in the city, going from 34 miles in 2000 to 242 in 2012, and 100 miles of trail and creekside riding, with more planned.

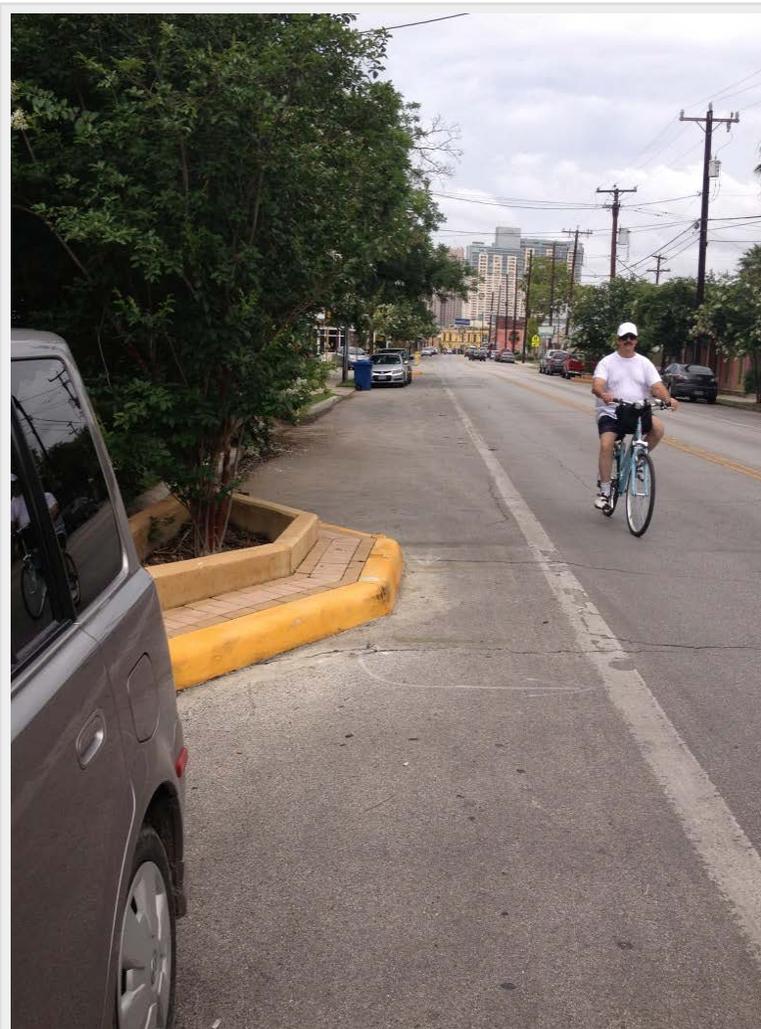
The [October 2012 presentation](#) to the [Bicycle Mobility Advisory Committee](#) by the [San Antonio-Bexar County Metropolitan Planning Organization](#) offers a good briefing on the city’s cycling infrastructure and what lies ahead in the way of improvements. For bike lanes to succeed, however, three elements are necessary:

- *Continuity.* Bike lanes that are only a few blocks in length and then disappear confuse motorists and cyclists. One minute you have separation from vehicle traffic, the next minute you are impeding traffic. San Antonio has very few [complete streets](#) that recognize the rights of cyclists, runners and pedestrians.

Signage. Prominent signage reminds drivers to share the road. It would be nice to see signage promoting the “three-foot rule.” Well-marked bike lanes with stenciled cycling silhouettes on the roadway also would help.

- *Parking.* Bike lanes aren’t really bike lanes if they are too narrow to be functional, or if it’s legal for motorists to park in them. Vehicles parked in a bike lane force cyclists back into traffic, which often provokes angry reactions from motorists. Anytime a motorist loses his or her temper over a cyclist, the danger quotient rises significantly. Smart cyclists choose flight over fight.

Cyclists familiar with the pedestrian sidewalk improvements in Southtown along S. Alamo and S. Presa Streets know to avoid these awkward sidewalk extensions and planters. The extensions add a bit of green to the streetscape, but their placement alongside the sidewalk, rather than next to vehicle traffic where they could serve as a buffer, eliminates any possibility of a secure bike lane.



This South Alamo Street landscaping amenity actually inhibits safe cycling. A smaller planter separating vehicle traffic from a secure bike lane would be better. Photo by Robert Rivard

Cycle Tracks

San Antonio has recently added a few European-style “[cycle tracks](#),” which provide a visible buffer

between cyclists and vehicle traffic, such as a parking lane, a curb, or even better, trees or plant boxes. I've cycled in rush hour cycling traffic in Denmark, where thousands of commuters, far outnumbering vehicle traffic, move along cycle tracks that are completely separated by landscaping and sound barriers.

"That's one of the reasons they don't worry as much about helmet use in Europe," Stallings said. "Over there they have so much separation between cyclists and riders it's just less of an issue. For San Antonio to be competitive in the long run it makes sense for the city to add more cycle tracks."

Cyclists who ride around the Pearl or Brackenridge Park will be familiar with the modest cycle tracks found there. City officials hope to add a cycle track to Cesar Chavez Boulevard, and others on Market and South Alamo streets as part of the Hemisfair Park redevelopment.

The tracks can pose their own set of challenges. It can be confusing for motorist and cyclist at intersections who has the right of way. Cycle tracks than run alongside parked vehicles limit visibility of moving traffic as you near an intersection. The few cycle tracks in San Antonio are short and end abruptly.



The author, Express-News reporter Colin McDonald and Richard Varn, a former city official on a cycle track next to Brackenridge Golf Course. Photo courtesy of COSA/Office of Sustainability

Be Safe, Be Bright

State law and [local ordinance](#) require cyclists to obey traffic laws.

Cyclists on the street between dusk and dawn are required to have a white light mounted on the front of their bike visible for 500 feet, and a red rear light visible for the same distance. Many cyclists wear brightly colored jerseys, and some affix blinking red lights to the back of their jerseys,

backpacks or helmets to heighten vehicle awareness. The City's Office of Sustainability has distributed more than 5,000 sets of bike lights in recent years to help cyclists light it up from dusk to dawn.

The City's San Antonio Bikes page offers cyclists and motorists an up-to-date guide to [current laws and ordinances](#). We'd all be safer if everyone would learn the rules of the road and abide by them.

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