

Seattle's Second Ave. should inspire Comm. Ave. plans



PHOTO: DERRICK Z. JACKSON/GLOBE STAFF
Seattle's Second Avenue bike track is separated from busy downtown traffic by white plastic posts, or "bollards."



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By Derrick Z. Jackson FEBRUARY 08, 2015

SEATTLE – I DID SOMETHING here I am scared to death to do in Boston: I bicycled on a weekday in the city's most bustling business district.

It was a feat made possible by Seattle's first protected downtown cycling track. The two-way lane — about as wide as a normal car lane — is on the left side of Second Avenue, a southbound, one-way thoroughfare. The track is only three-quarters of a mile long, but after its unveiling in September, the city said the number of daily cyclists on the avenue tripled to some 1,000.

The new path replaced the more traditional style painfully familiar to those in Boston and Cambridge who dare cycle Massachusetts Avenue, Commonwealth Avenue, or downtown — a skinny unprotected painted stripe wedged in between a speeding car lane and swerving curbside parking. The old version was constantly blocked by delivery trucks, drivers dropping off passengers, or desperate coffee drinkers in Starbucks land. It was "death-defying," in the words of John Pucher, a cycling researcher at Rutgers, who rode down Second Avenue about a year and half ago. "I almost got killed five or six times," Pucher declared in a subsequent speech to Seattle cycling advocates.

Second Avenue's reputation got so bad that Mayor Ed Murray made it a priority to redesign it. He seconded his seriousness last summer by hiring Scott Kubly as transportation director. Known for his self-described "progressive transportation initiatives," Kubly is a former director of Alta Bicycle Share (now called Motivate), the parent company of Boston's Hubway. He'd worked in the Chicago and Washington, D.C., transit departments as those cities elevated cycling's profile in commuting.



Seattle's efforts to encourage bicycling
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The redesign was certainly progressive. The bike track replaced the old parking lane, and parking and deliveries were moved over into a traffic lane that flexes between rush-hour driving and off-peak parking. The bike track further is protected from traffic for many stretches by plastic posts known as "bollards."

At intersections, there are separate traffic lights for cyclists to continue and for cars turning left across the bike track. There is also a separate traffic light for pedestrians to cross without getting hit by either cars or cycles. Cyclists I hailed at stop lights told me the difference between the old and new lane was night-and-day, or more accurately, nightmare and daylight from danger.

Second Avenue is only one example of Seattle's efforts to be truly bike-friendly. The city plans 33 more miles of protected lanes by 2019. For the last two years, the national cycle advocacy group People for Bikes has ranked the 10 best new protected bike lanes in America, and in total, Seattle had four — the most in the nation. Second Avenue was one, and I rode on another, Broadway Avenue. Despite classic Seattle winter dimness and rain, I rode through a busy collegiate, cafe, and residential district with no worry about being sideswiped by a sliding car.

“Seattle’s really leading in quick implementation,” said Martha Roskowski, a vice president for People for Bikes, based in Boulder, Colo. “They’re on an aggressive timeline.”

It is a timeline that should prod Boston likewise to speed up its pace for installing protected lanes. Like Seattle, the city’s urban core is bursting with new dense developments, virtually mandating more walkability, cycling, and transit use. People for Bikes has suggested that Boston has “more potential for bike improvements than any other large city in the United States.” But none of the group’s celebrated new protected bike lanes are in Boston’s metropolitan area — while Chicago had three, and San Francisco and Memphis had two apiece.

That could soon change. One potential catalyst is a plan to modernize Commonwealth Avenue between the BU Bridge and Packard’s Corner in Allston. The city’s original blueprint showed no protected bike lanes — despite the road’s reputation for being as dangerous as Second Avenue plus a massive population of students, a natural bike constituency. In the city’s 2013 report on cyclist safety, one of Boston’s most dangerous sections, with nearly 30 collisions between 2009-2012, was a short stretch of Commonwealth Avenue near Boston University’s Agganis Arena.

The city went back to the drawing board after an outcry by advocates, media criticism, and an impassioned public meeting two months ago at Boston University where more than 100 citizens showed up despite a nor’easter. A new draft, shown to me by deputy transportation commissioner James Gillooly and Boston Bikes director Nicole Freedman, now shows a protected bike track on each side of Commonwealth Avenue. Similar to Second Avenue, the track goes alongside the curb in the old parking lane, parking will be moved out next to traffic, and cyclists and parked cars will be separated by posts or some other form of raised buffer.

“The process has been a great lesson on how fast the era of cycling has grown,” Gillooly said. “There are many trade-offs when you do this kind of redesign, and you want to be careful you’re not asking too much of drivers, delivery trucks, and other traditional users of the same roadway. But with so many bicycles now, the highest priority is safety.”

This new priority is a critical, welcome shift. There are other important bike-track projects on the horizon, from the downtown historic district to Roxbury. Yet, in many ways, Commonwealth Avenue is the first major test of whether Boston’s goal of increasing bike commuting fivefold to 10 percent by 2020 or realizing its 30-year-plan for a European-style cycle network is for real.

After all, the avenue is one of the widest, straightest, and most heavily traveled streets in the city. If a safe thoroughway for bikes cannot be put there, it’s hard to imagine it anywhere else. Safe cycle tracks on Commonwealth will speed the day when cycle tracks are, in fact, common.

And Seattle knows the price for failing to do so is too high.

As two-wheeled commuters dismounted amid the city’s tallest office towers, I rode Seattle’s Hubway-like Pronto! bike share from one iconic tourist zone to another, from the smoked salmon stands at Pike Place Market to the art galleries, cafes, and gold rush history in Pioneer Square.

At one corner, Second and University Street, a tragic shrine symbolized the need for such a lane. A white-painted bike was chained in a slumped angle to a post. It was a “ghost bike” to remember a cyclist killed at the corner by a driver turning in front of her. The accident occurred less than two weeks before the updated track opened, taking the life of 31-year-old civil rights attorney Sher Kung. Kung had gained renown for representing a lesbian military nurse against discharge in the “don’t-ask-don’t-tell” era.

As Sam Woods, head of pedestrian and bicycle programs for the city’s transportation department recalled, “On the day of the grand opening I asked one woman who was riding on the new bike lane how she liked it — she was in tears and said that she had been riding on the bike lane for the past three years. This was the first time she felt safe.” Now is the time to make a safer future for Boston’s cyclists, too.

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