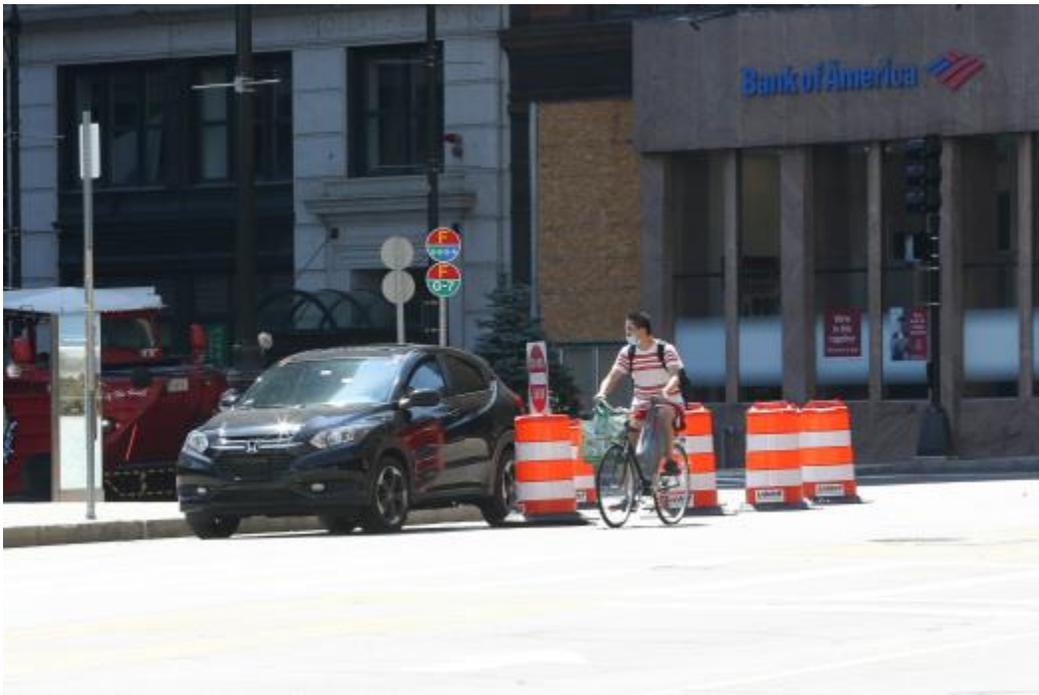


‘Bike boom’ clearing out bicycle shops in Boston

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BOSTON, MA: August 1, 2020: A cyclist rides into the traffic lane to go around a vehicle parked in newly designated bicycle lane on Cambridge Street in Boston, Massachusetts. (Staff photo by Nicolaus Czarnecki/MediaNews Group/Boston Herald)

There's a bike-riding boom going on amid the pandemic as bicycle shops struggle to even keep bikes on the shelves and Boston tries to keep its new bike lanes clear of cars.

Bruce Weber of Ace Wheelworks bike shop in Cambridge described this as an unrivaled “bike boom” in recent American history, trouncing the bicycling popularity in the 1970s.

“That was nothing close to this. This is 10 times what that was,” Weber told the Herald. “I’m pretty sure it has to do with cabin fever.”

The shelves are bare of pretty much any adult bike below \$1,000, to the disappointment of locals — plus the people calling from New York, New Hampshire and other states, hoping to happen upon any bike shop that still has some in stock.

“It’s unprecedented,” Weber said.

Bike enthusiasts say the pandemic creates a confluence of demands for bikes. For many, cycling is simply something to do, especially in the warm summer weather; that’s led to places like the Columbia Rail Trail in Western Massachusetts to report colossal increases in recreational bikers year over year. And then there are people looking to avoid the potentially crowded and confined MBTA trains and buses on their way to work. And finally, people are looking to get some exercise as gyms only now are beginning to open in a limited capacity.

Several bike stores reported compounding tensions: these huge increases in demand — plus a spotty supply chain. Most bikes are made in Asia, and the pandemic has made imports inconsistent over the past few months.

Connor McSorley, of Ashmont Cycles in Boston, said there’s not only the massive crush for new bikes, but also to repair older ones. And acquiring new bicycle parts isn’t much easier than getting a whole new bike.

“The bicycle-part supply chain has been absolutely ridiculous,” he said.

Bluebikes, the bicycle-share service around Boston, said rides nosedived as the pandemic set in, but has rebounded. A spokesman said there’s been a big jump on evenings and weekends, with new riders making up 30% of rides in April and 39% in May, compared to 21% and 23% in these months last year.

The city of Boston has taken this opportunity to install ad-hoc bike lanes, using barrels and plastic Jersey barriers to carve space for cyclists in various roadways around the city. The lanes have been popular with bikers and advocates, though many complain about cars intruding into the lanes — and those gripes are backed up by plenty of photo evidence.

Galen Mook of MassBike acknowledged the huge upswing in bikers out and about, and said the city generally is doing a good job with these new bike lanes. The issue, he said, is more or less the same as the people who stop in normal bike lanes all the time.

“It’s a cultural problem in the city of Boston — drivers feel like they can park wherever they want,” Mook said, noting five fatalities among bike riders this year.

Mayor Martin Walsh’s office said the city issues tickets for people stopping in the bike lanes, though the number of tickets issued wasn’t immediately available. The city says its Public Works Department is working to attempt to keep the lanes clear and the barrels in the right places, and asks anyone who sees parking scofflaws to call 311.

And Stacy Thompson of Livable Streets Alliance said, “The problem isn’t the new tactical bike lanes — the new tactical bike lanes are great. The problem is that people in this city don’t follow the rules.”

She said the city should focus more on making these new bike lanes in areas with more people of color and front-line workers who are riding bikes to and from their jobs — places like American Legion Highway and Dorchester Avenue.

“We need (to be) more clear and strategic with the public about what’s happening, why it’s happening and what for the vision,” Thompson said.