

# Creating Bike Lanes Isn't Easy. Just Ask Baltimore. Or Boulder. Or Seattle.

Supporters say protected lanes prevent car-bike collisions; critics complain about less parking and more congestion



*A cyclist rides in a bike lane separated from moving vehicles with a lane of parked cars on Roland Avenue in Baltimore. Some residents are fighting to get the city to remove the bike lane. Photo: Scott Calvert/The Wall Street Journal*

By Scott Calvert

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BALTIMORE—Cities' drive to expand bike lanes keeps running into a wall of opposition—even in bike-friendly places like Seattle or Boulder, Colo.

In Baltimore last week, residents of the upscale Roland Park neighborhood beseeched city transportation officials at a boisterous public meeting to remove a roughly mile-long protected bike lane that opened about two years ago along a major thoroughfare.

When the city's transportation director called it a "complex situation," several people in the crowd of more than 100 responded with shouts of "No, no!" and "It's very simple!" and "Put it back the way it was!"

"This is tearing us apart as a community," said Claudia Diamond, one of the residents asking the city for a "reset" and renewed planning process.

Baltimore is hardly alone. Similar fights have broken out from Philadelphia to Seattle, Boulder to Brooklyn. At issue are protected bike lanes that use barriers like parked cars or bollards to separate bikers from moving cars. Creating such lanes often requires eliminating parking or a lane for cars, changes that affect people's daily lives.

Supporters say they help prevent car-bike collisions and are a big step up from painted lanes or shared road access. But critics complain about reduced street parking, increased traffic congestion and challenges for delivery trucks navigating city streets.

The number of bike commuters nationwide has ebbed in recent years, but rose nearly 40% from 2006 to 2016, when 864,000 rode to work, according to the Census Bureau. In addition, dozens of cities have rolled out bike-share programs, and ridership nationwide soared to 28 million trips in 2016 from barely 300,000 in 2010, according to the National Association of City Transportation Officials.

Part of cities' intent with the lanes is to reverse a trend of increasing cyclist fatalities around the country. The number of cyclists killed in motor-vehicle crashes edged up in 2016 to 840, the most since 1991, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Only 3% of those fatalities occurred in bike lanes, the agency said, compared with 28% at intersections and 61% on roadways.



A bike delivery driver uses a bicycle-only lane on a downtown Seattle in 2016. Photo: Elaine Thompson/Associated Press

The protected bike lane trend began in New York City about a decade ago when Michael Bloomberg was mayor, said Kate Fillin-Yeh, who directs strategy at the nonprofit National Association of City Transportation Officials and worked in the Bloomberg administration.

A partial list maintained by People for Bikes shows U.S. cities, led by New York, have added more than 230 miles of protected bike lanes since 2014, a far quicker pace than in prior years.

Tim Blumenthal, president of the Colorado-based advocacy group People for Bikes, said the increase in protected lanes is fueling what has come to be known as "bikelash."

"Bike infrastructure improvements are a hot button, and some people react really strongly and emotionally and negatively to them," he said.



Residents discussed Roland Park's controversial protected bike lane with transportation officials Thursday in Baltimore. Photo: Scott Calvert/The Wall Street Journal

In Philadelphia, officials nixed plans to add a protected bike lane on a downtown street after neighborhood pushback, but they are moving ahead with similar projects around Center City.

A battle has also emerged in Seattle over a protected lane on the north side that officials say will be under construction by early summer. Rival groups have squared off over the plan, which would limit parking to one side of the street. Opponents are rallying to "Save 35th Ave," as supporters clamor for a "Safe 35th Ave."

In Boulder, the city installed a protected bike lane three years ago and three months later removed part of it, after howls of protest over the loss of one of two vehicle travel lanes in both directions.

"There was kind of a full-speed assumption that we're Biketown USA, let's do this. Of course people will understand it," said Bill Rigler, chairman of the city's Transportation Advisory Board. "People felt very strongly that it was the dumbest thing Boulder had ever done."

Though Boulder's disputed bike lane quickly yielded benefits—less speeding and a 58% jump in cycling traffic, with only minimally longer car travel times—the city did a poor job explaining the rationale beforehand and preparing the public, he said.



Dockless bike-sharing is likely coming to a city near you. To see what the world looks like from behind the handlebars, WSJ's David Pierce takes an Uber Bike for a spin around San Francisco.

“The backlash was so significant it became a case study in how to never roll out a program like this again,” said Mr. Rigler, adding that the city has improved its public outreach.

Retrofitting city streets for protected bike lanes can be pricey. A master plan prepared for Baltimore’s Transportation Department recommended adding 52.5 miles over five years at a cost of \$26 million, a tab the plan said could be covered by a mix of local, state and federal funds.

Last year, when Baltimore moved to rip out part of a new protected bike lane in the waterfront Canton neighborhood, bike advocates sued and got a restraining order. The suit was settled, and the protected lane remains.

With the Roland Avenue bike lane, the city minimized lost parking and kept all travel lanes by squeezing in the roughly 4-foot-wide path along the curb, shielded by parked cars.

At Thursday’s meeting, some people said it makes them feel safe, but most speakers called it a failure. A common refrain was that the road is too narrow, making it dangerous for drivers getting in and out of their cars. Some residents said cars have clipped their side mirrors; others said they had almost been hit by cyclists while crossing the bike lane.

The city’s solution, backed by local bike advocates, is now to shrink the road from two lanes to one in both directions, on a trial basis.

Several residents panned the idea. Some in ways that highlight the entire debate.

“Don’t try to solve a problem,” one man said to applause, “by creating a massive new problem.”

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