

Why Bike Lanes are a Bad Idea

A bike lane is a lane reserved for cyclists, and it's usually on the right edge of the roadway. Bike lanes are separated from the rest of traffic by a solid or striped line.

If you ride regularly, you probably have somebody in your life who's just itching to tell you that the city ought to put a bike lane on every major street. "It will be safer," these folk proclaim. Are they right?

No. Bike lanes only do two things: they make life worse for cyclists, and they allow politicians and uninformed advocates to feel that they've "done something for cycling."

This page will outline some of the problems that bike lanes create. You'll see that:

- bike lanes cause turning and crossing conflicts for cyclists and motorists by
 - encouraging cyclists to ride in an unsafe fashion,
 - encouraging motorists to drive in an unsafe fashion
- bike lanes contain additional road hazards for cyclists
- bike lanes lead to discrimination against cyclists.
- cyclists don't need bike lanes, anyway.
- wider curb lanes are better than bike lanes.

The first problem with bike lanes is:

Bike lanes cause turning and crossing conflicts.

Think first about what it's like on an arterial street when there is no bike lane. On an arterial without bike lanes, everybody follows the same rules. Drivers planning to turn right position themselves in the right hand lane. Those planning to turn left do so from the left-turning lane. Drivers planning to go straight through the intersection travel in any lane that is not designated for left or right-turners only. A driver of a slower vehicle keeps to the right, but stays out of right turning lanes unless he plans to turn right.

Cyclists follow the same traffic laws as anybody else, and ride safely when they follow standard vehicular cycling principles. Any competent cyclist will be able to negotiate city traffic without difficulty. When bike lanes are present,

Bike lanes encourage cyclists to ride in a dangerous fashion.

The presence of a bike lane encourages cyclists to ride in the bike lane, even when it is not appropriate to ride on the far right side of the road. This causes the following problems:

Improper positioning at intersections where motorists want to turn right.

Arterial streets often have right turn only lanes at intersections. In this case, a cyclist who is planning to go straight through the intersection must merge out of

the right turn lane before reaching the intersection. This leaves the right turning lane free for those who do wish to turn right, and it ensures that nobody will turn right across the cyclist's path.

What happens when the bike lane suddenly becomes the right turn only lane? Most cyclists will remain on the right side of the right turn only lane, and will ride straight through the intersection. This puts these riders at great risk, as right-turning motorists are likely to pass such cyclists while turning right.

Even if there is no right turn only lane, the same problem will occur on a street with bike lanes: inexperienced cyclists blindly follow the bike lane, and are cut off by right turning motorists as the cyclist is going straight through the intersection.

Improper positioning for left hand turns

In order to turn left from one arterial street to another, the cyclist must merge across several lanes of traffic in order to turn left from the left-turning lane.

When bike lanes are present, inexperienced cyclists tend to remain in the bike lane until they turn left. Of course this means that the rider then has to cross several lanes all at once, which is just about impossible to do safely.

(Back to [top](#) of page.)

Bike lanes cause motorists to drive in a dangerous fashion.

Motorists don't know how to drive safely on a street where there are bike lanes, and this leads to the following problems:

Dangerous right turns across the cyclist's path.

A driver turning right is supposed to merge right until he is in the right-most lane before he makes his turn. The presence of a bike lane makes it less likely that a motorist will actually do this, because drivers know that the bike lane is for bikes only. So, instead of carefully merging into the bike lane before turning right, motorists tend to stay to the left of the bike lane until the last moment before the turn, then sharply turn across the bike lane.

When drivers under-estimate the speed of a cyclist in the bike lane (as they often do) the result is that the cyclist is almost hit (or worse) as the motorist suddenly veers across the bike lane.

Failure to yield the right of way when crossing the arterial from a side street.

A motorist on a side street, planning to cross an arterial street, first looks for traffic on the arterial street. And where does he look? Far enough out on the road

to see where the automobile traffic travels. As drivers tend to miss the bike lane in their visual sweeps, they often don't notice a cyclist in the bike lane.

The result? Cyclists in bike lanes find that motorists dart out in front of them, seemingly without having noticed the cyclist's presence. This is accident-causing behaviour, especially if the cyclist is travelling at speed.

(Back to [top](#) of page.)

Bike lanes contain more road hazards

Debris

When debris, such as broken glass, is deposited upon the roadway, motor traffic sweeps this debris to the side of the road. Since automobile drivers tend to stay out of the bike lane, debris gets swept into the bike lane, and it stays there - that's why bike lanes are notorious for collecting bits of mufflers and broken glass and other unwanted objects. Sure, you can have the city crew come along and sweep it up, but how often is this likely to happen? And is it worth spending tax dollars on sweeping that wouldn't be necessary anyway if there was no bike lane?

Misguided people

As if this isn't enough, they also collect unwanted beings: people who shouldn't be in the bike lane to begin with. Ride in the bike lane and you're likely to encounter wrong-way cyclists, skateboarders, people pushing baby strollers or walking their dogs, or... well, all sorts of people who should be elsewhere.

A commuting bicyclist is capable of a decent speed - often as fast as, or even faster than the automobile traffic. So of course we don't want to mix cycling and pedestrians, yet that often happens in bike lanes.

Bike lanes lead to discrimination against cyclists

A cyclist who rides safely and in a vehicular manner will face discrimination on a street with bike lanes. When a cyclist plans to turn left, that rider must first merge across a couple of lanes of traffic to get to the left turning lane. A competent cyclist does this smoothly and without incident every day.

When there is a bike lane on the street, a cyclist who merges left in preparation for a left hand turn is likely to face honks and comments from motorists. "Hey!" they'll say as the cyclist begins changing lanes, "use the bike lane!" Once a bike lane exists, many motorists think that cyclists must use that bike lane, and only the bike lane.

Worse yet, some local authorities enact by-laws stating that cyclists must use the bike lane, and only the bike lane. This legislates dangerous cycling.

Cyclists don't need bike lanes, anyway

Any competent cyclist will have the skills required to cycle safely on any street. These experienced cyclists will tell you that riding in traffic is easy, but riding on streets with bike lanes is annoying and dangerous.

Don't feel confident riding in traffic? Then take a [traffic cycling skills course](#). Just as we don't provide special facilities for incompetent drivers, we should not waste tax dollars in providing facilities for incompetent cyclists... especially when those facilities create serious dangers and liability problems.

Wider curb lanes are better than bike lanes

Bike lanes aren't the answer, but there are engineering solutions that will make life easier for cyclists. For example, a wider curb lane (with no stripe designating a bike lane) will make it possible for cyclists to share the lane with automobile traffic. (Please note that, while wider curb lanes are a help to cyclists, a skilled cyclist can ride safely on an arterial street regardless of lane width.)

For more information on curb lane width and other engineering issues that affect cyclists, refer to [Bicycle Transportation](#) by John Forester.