



Overcoming Traffic Fears

Five Ways to Help Cyclists Survive the Chicago Roads

By Ted Villaire

You're on your way home from work and a coworker notices your bike helmet tucked under your arm, and says, "You're a cyclist?" You nod and perhaps mention one of the many benefits of pedaling to work. Then your colleague says something you've likely heard number of times: "I'd love to ride to work, but the traffic is too dangerous." How should you respond? Do you dismiss your colleague's fears and tell him or her to quit whining and get riding? Do you tell this person that biking is not for everyone and leave it at that? Or do you suggest ways he or she may become more comfortable biking in traffic?

For those with an interest in earning songs of high praise from their cycling friends, here are suggestions offered by a handful of local cycling instructors on how you can provide encouragement and guidance to the up-and-coming cyclists in your midst.

1. Understand their fears. When someone is afraid of riding in traffic, the first step is confirming his or her concerns, said Dave Glowacz, author of *Urban Bikers Tricks and Tips: Low-Tech and No-Tech Ways to Find, Ride and Keep a Bicycle*. Glowacz said this approach typically opens the door to more conversation: "I say 'Yeah, it is scary, but there are a lot of people who do it and don't have any trouble,'"

"I acknowledge that it's a valid feeling no matter how realistic their concerns are," said Randy Warren, a Chicago Bicycle Federation (CBF) program specialist who heads up the federation's Commuter Challenge. Warren suggests asking if there are specific situations that are most scary for this person, and then offering some solutions—or providing him or her with relevant resources.

2. Suggest a mentor. Sarah Kaplan, a cycling instructor and bike mechanic, said novice riders can learn a lot by riding with more experienced riders. Many urban biking skills—such as positioning oneself at a stoplight, making left turns at a busy intersection, and riding through traffic jams—are better understood when seen, she said. If the colleague lives within a reasonable distance of you, Kaplan suggests commuting with this person until he or she achieves a greater level of comfort. Also, she said, you may try to connect your colleague with other bike commuters who could ride with this person or advise him or her on local routes.

3. Expand their comfort zone. "Suggest that they ride in a places that are comfortable and then expand their territory slowly," said Glowacz. Your colleague may want to start out on a quiet bike path, and then slowly move onto quiet streets, he said, and then busy streets with a bike lane, and then busy streets without a bike lane. Eventually, said Glowacz, "Most people can achieve a level comfort riding in most places." Still, he warns, some people will never feel comfortable riding in car traffic.

4. Send 'em to school. Chicago cycling instructor Eric Willmes said beginners will become more self-assured if they know basic skills such as riding predictably, being visible, using a helmet, and keeping a safe distance from parked cars. Bicycle safety classes offer an introduction to these topics from trained individuals. Wilmes and other biking instructors said that people who participate in a good bike safety class consistently express how much safer and more comfortable they feel riding in a variety of traffic conditions. Cycling courses also typically touch upon other topics essential for novices, such as bike selection and fit, basics of bike handling, and maintenance. (See www.biketraffic.org/school for a listing of local classes.)

5. Offer resources. Give your colleague a copy of the free Chicago Bike Map and explain why it's important to stick to bike-friendly roads (www.chicagobikes.org). Point out the Safe Bicycling in Illinois guide and CBF resources such as Bike to Work Guide, Chicagoland Bicycle Map and Safe Bicycling in Chicago, all found out www.biketraffic.org.

While fear of traffic is likely to be the most common obstacle holding people back from bike commuting, a variety of other concerns may crop up. These could involve anything from parking to cleanup to clothing to plain ol' fear of being different. Some of these concerns you could help with; others are addressed in the resources listed above. And, of course, whatever amount of guidance you provide for the would-be cyclists around you, don't forget to brag about your efforts with your cycling friends.

Ted Villaire is a year-round cyclist and author of 60 Hikes within 60 Miles: Chicago. A second edition of the book has just been published by Menasha Ridge Press. Get in touch with him by visiting www.tedvillaire.com.