

CYCLE PLANS *in the slow lane*

If more was invested in Cycling Super Highways would we finally be encouraged to ditch the car in favour of the cheaper, more healthy bike? **Graham Readfearn** reports

They're cheap, good for the planet, good for your health and, with a little effort, they'll get you to work on time. Few people can argue with the benefits of cycling and the Queensland Government has made it clear it wants more bums on cycling seats. Yet the humble two-wheeler has been stuck in the slow lane of transport planning ever since the internal combustion engine spluttered its way into modern consciousness.

Bicycle Week, from 12 to 20 March, aims to promote all that is good about travelling on two wheels. But such is the motor car's dominance that only about one in every 100 journeys made in South East Queensland is on a bike.

What's needed, it seems, is a bold new vision and when it comes to grand ideas, fewer could be grander than that of Brisbane-based transport planner Rachel Smith. Smith is a big believer in the bicycle but says the reason more people don't use them has less to do with sweat and leg power and more to do with a lack of safe cycle routes that connect people to popular destinations.

After travelling the world to find cycling success stories, Smith is promoting Cycling Super Highways which make the average Brisbane bike lane look more like a pothole-ridden dirt track to nowhere.

"At the moment we build skinny unprotected on-road cycle lanes, often less than half a metre wide and then stand back and wonder why 'normal' people don't cycle," says Smith.

Smith held interviews with groups of women, children and senior citizens who

typically, she says, rarely use bikes for transport. The results showed fears for personal safety on traffic-clogged roads and a lack of dedicated cycleways were keeping people off bikes.

After winning a scholarship from the Australian Institute of Traffic Planning and Management, Smith went off to investigate bicycle paths around the world. She saw versions of her Cycling Super Highways in action in 24 cities in countries including Columbia, The Netherlands, England, Denmark, USA, France and Germany.

Her own vision is for cycleways that are seven metres wide, separated from cars, well-lit and – importantly – designed for everyone from cycling enthusiasts to young families, pensioners and daily commuters.

In South East Queensland more than 80 per cent of all our journeys are made by private vehicle, a figure the Queensland Government has argued should fall by 20 per cent in the next 20 years. It is currently revising its new blueprint for the future of transport, Connecting SEQ 2031, but it is not expected to reach Premier Anna Bligh's cabinet before mid-year.

The draft plan suggests the region needs to increase the number of journeys being taken on bicycles from its current level of 1.2 per cent to 9 per cent by 2031. In some cities which Rachel Smith visited more than half of all journeys are taken by bike.

"If we keep building skinny bikeways then we won't meet those targets," argues Smith, who also says an "obsession" with skin-tight cycling gear and expensive racing bikes might also be discouraging

would-be cyclists.

Cutting Brisbane's reliance on cars will only become more pressing in the years to come. Many energy analysts now agree the era of cheap oil is coming to an end, causing an inexorable rise in the cost of petrol. Even without this pressure, burning fossil fuels such as oil for energy is adding greenhouse gases to the atmosphere, causing climate change.

Dr Matthew Burke, a research fellow at the Urban Research Program at Griffith University, says that, in simple terms, "we have made cycling too hard".

"The way we have built our cities and roads means that cycling isn't just perceived as unsafe, but we have actually created hostile landscapes for cycling," he says.

Dedicated routes similar to Smith's Cycling Super Highways can completely change people's perceptions of cycling. "Separating cyclists from traffic creates a very different feel," says Dr Burke. "The rider feels safe because the cars can't hit them. All that feeling of anxiety disappears."

As proof that building separate cycle routes can encourage people to abandon their cars, Burke points to the Bicentennial Bikeway which runs along Coronation Drive. "That route was built in 1988 and we thought it would be big enough to last 50 years," says Burke. "But now, within 20 years, it's full."

Ben Wilson, manager of Bicycle Queensland, says there are already some areas of Brisbane where as many as seven



Cycling Super Highways are already a fact of life in dozens of cities around the world

per cent of all trips are being made on bikes. But he says that those areas, such as West End and Toowong, tend to be ones which have dedicated cycleways close by.

"Sharing roads with cars has always been the elephant in the room," he says. "Most people are unlikely to have a bike path outside their front door, so they need to get there. People want to get where they're going in a way that they feel safe."

Bicycle Queensland is already lobbying governments and councils for an increase in bike paths that are separated from traffic. Wilson says the organisation is currently pushing hard for two "super-bikeways" being considered as part of major developments in West End and between The 'Gabba area and the Goodwill Bridge.

"The big increases that we have seen in cycling are where people can get to a bike path and ride to the city. Where people have to share the road with cars, we don't get big increases," Wilson says.

More than 25 activities are planned in the Brisbane area for Bike Week from 12 to 20 March. To find out more see www.bikeweek.bq.org.au.

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