

# BAR BULLETIN

KCBA KING COUNTY BAR ASSOCIATION

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THE  
*Resolutions Issue*

Volume 26 • Issue 5 • \$2.00

January 2008

## Seattle's Bike Master Plan: The Big Depends

By Bob Anderton

Seattle's 2007 Bicycle Master Plan is like a big New Year's Resolution. It claims to be a "visionary, yet practical, action strategy to make Seattle a world-class city for bicycling." Will it succeed in its goal of making "Seattle the best community for bicycling in the United States?" As a lawyer — and a bike lawyer at that — I will fall back on the old standby: "It depends."

The plan is big. So big it crashed my computer the first time I tried to download it. I do wonder who will read it. A little editing might have helped citizens focus on a final vision. For instance, there is a graph that fills page 92 showing the number of responses to a survey for each day during the survey period.<sup>1</sup>

Mayor Greg Nickels sometimes talks about "the Seattle Way." There are many good things about our city and no one would quibble with a claim that Seattle is a world-class city for planning. But it is also clear that we have a problem with actually *doing* the things that need to be done.

Hence, our increasingly snarled traffic and the growing popularity of bike commuting. The worse traffic gets, the more appealing it is to ride a bike. And, believe me, there is no substitute for seeing a Porsche stuck in traffic as you cruise by on your bike. Perhaps if the Viaduct collapses before we decide what to do about it and our other failing infrastructure, Seattle will become a better bicycling city by default.

What does the Master Plan actually do? Less than the rhetoric might suggest. By 2016, Seattle commits to 454.7 miles of bicycle facilities.<sup>2</sup> Well, "commit" might be too strong of a word. Actually, according to the Executive Summary, they are "*Recommended* Facilities." And page 13 of the Plan says that the projects "will require additional evaluation during the implementation process to determine if there are other factors that may either help or hinder their development."

But, be assured, "If the city decides not to proceed with implementing the Bicycle Master Plan recommendation on a particular roadway, it will document the reason for this decision." No doubt.

So, what are the 450-plus miles of bike facilities that we may — or may not — be getting? Once again, that's a bit complicated. According to page 15 of the Plan, "Almost all Bicycle Facility Network segments will have some type of visual cue (i.e. a bike lane, a bike route sign, a pavement marking, a trail, etc.) to indicate that special accommodations have been made for bicyclists." In other words, paint on the road can create a Bicycle Facility.

Only 60.8 miles of the recommendations are for facilities that are physically separated from regular roadways. The majority of the recommendations (253.8 miles) appear to be little more than paint on the street.

Bike lanes are good — or are they? My impression is that motorists are almost completely oblivious to bike lanes and bicyclists are lulled into a false sense of security on them. For instance, Second Avenue has a bike lane through downtown on the left side of this one-way street. Passengers in parked cars regularly "door" bicyclists as they exit vehicles legally parked to

the left of the bike lane. Turning vehicles often collide with bicycles as they blithely swerve left through the bike lane.

I was thrilled to see that the Master Plan recommends that this lane finally be removed. As I look out my office window, I see that this has not yet occurred. And, while I do not toss my business cards out the window at the sound of a crash, I have had more than one client who was hit in the Second Avenue bike lane.

The Master Plan would replace the Second Avenue bike lane with a "Sharrows," which is a painted arrow that designates a shared lane. Will motorists notice this more than a bike lane? I can't answer that question, but at least Sharrows would not lure bicyclists into riding in the most dangerous area of the street.

Don't get me wrong. I am happy that Seattle made a Master Bike Plan. I am certainly skeptical of it, but I don't have a competing plan to make Seattle the best place to ride in the entire universe. What I do have is some practical knowledge as a person who rides around town and represents other bicyclists. From my limited perspective, I am aware of a few gaps in the Master Plan.

For instance, sewer grates. Seattle has numerous sewer grates that have wide openings parallel to traffic. These grates act like "bike traps" that can and do ensnare bicyclists, legal users of the road whose tires happen to be narrower than a car's. Why do I focus on this? Seattle is full of dangers for bicyclists — potholes and gaps in pavement abound. But these old grates are dangerous by design, not by neglect.<sup>3</sup> I find this to be more culpable.

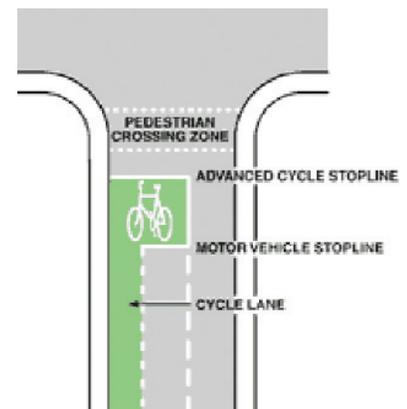
Seattle has had a bike-safe grate design for decades, but has never inventoried where the unsafe grates are. Seattle's policy has long been to replace the grates whenever a street is repaved. Its unwritten policy also appears to be to replace the grates whenever a person is injured and files a claim.

The Master Plan on page 33 may be read to call for replacing even fewer grates than previously planned since it calls for replacement "as needed, when streets are repaved *and* bicycle facilities are added as part of Seattle's Complete Streets policy" (emphasis added). Tucked away on page 147 in Appendix O of the Master Plan is a note that "[c]osts for adding new pavement to create on-road bicycle facilities do not include ... drainage ... because specific projects are not yet defined and those project limits are unknown." Which is to say, there is no money in the Plan to pay for bike-safe grates.

I have represented bicyclists who were seriously injured on the old grates. They offered to settle their claims for zero monetary compensation if the City would agree to inventory and replace the grates. No dice. The City even argued on summary judgment that it owed no duty to a bicyclist who crashed on an old sewer grate.<sup>4</sup> Can you imagine hearing this argument if the grates allowed a car tire to be swallowed up? I can't.

The Bar Bulletin editor asked me to address whether the Master Plan will reduce conflict between bicyclists and motorists. Naturally, the answer is, "It depends."

One strategy that I especially like is sometimes called an advanced stop line or bike box. The Master Plan refers to a "pocket lane" that I think could do the same thing. Essentially, this is an area at the front of an intersection reserved for bikes with room for cars to make right turns on red. Here is an illustration as it is used in London:



With a pocket lane, everybody wins. Motorists sometimes get angry with bicyclists who ride to the front of stopped traffic or refuse to get out of their way when they want to turn right on red. A bike box makes it clear that both actions are allowed and sets out space for it to be done.

I sometimes wonder if the conflict between bikes and cars in Seattle has something to do with drivers drinking too much coffee. Assuming that that is not going to change, having a pocket lane with a clear indication that bicyclists are not "cheating" motorists out of their place in line may make it less likely that an over-coffee SUV driver will decide to ram a bike commuter who passes him at a stop light.

Unfortunately, the Master Plan is a bit vague as to what it means by a pocket lane and calls it "experimental."<sup>5</sup> Though such lanes are common in many European cities, the Plan recommends "that Seattle conduct additional experimental studies before widespread implementation."

So, once again, it depends on whether the City actually *acts* on the positive possibilities of the Master Plan. Let's hope it does. We can all agree that Seattle can use all the transportation improvements it can get. ■

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<sup>1</sup> Why would anyone want to know that 13 people responded on 8/26/2006?

<sup>2</sup> This according to the Executive Summary. The actual plan commits to 454.8 miles. Perhaps they lost a tenth of a mile on the way to the Executive's office.

<sup>3</sup> This is also the case with the SLUT — the brand new South Lake Union Trolley tracks that zigzag across Westlake without warning, causing experienced bicyclists to crash.

<sup>4</sup> This appears to be inconsistent with SMC 11.44.020, which provides that bicyclists are generally granted all rights of a motor vehicle.

<sup>5</sup> The only example of this I am aware of in Seattle is on Pine Street at the I-5 overpass. In my observation, while not well marked, it still works well.

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