Riding the wave of the future: Cities plan sprawling network of bicycle lanes

By Donna Littlejohn, Staff Writer

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Two wheels, handlebars and a seat.

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Now, a cycling revival of sorts is sweeping across America’s cities, especially among adults seeking a healthier alternative to the automobile. And maybe a bit more fun in their lives.

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The goal is to connect the sprawling, car-loving metropolis and make it more bike-friendly.

It won’t come without growing pains, as officials were warnings from filmmakers who like their more-dramatic cousin.

But relief forecast for today (103), Long Beach (97), officials say.

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Justice Department secretly obtains Associated Press phone records.

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And a new green lane bikeway on Spring Street in downtown Los Angeles has prompted grousing from filmmakers who like the area for its historic movie scenes.

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The genesis of the regional push for more bike-friendly transportation routes in Los Angeles is often traced to Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa’s broken elbow. Three years ago, Villaraigosa was knocked off his bike when a taxi pulled out in front of him while he was in the bike lane on Venice Boulevard.

But the discussion about improving the city’s focus on bike safety already was in gear, riding a wave of what has been the growing global bike culture.

“Things are changing all over the world,” Fremaux said, citing cities that have active bike-share programs.

But he acknowledges it’s an uphill battle in a car-centric place like L.A.

Ted Rogers, who writes the BikingInLA blog and is a member of the Los Angeles County Bike Coalition, said cycling nevertheless is catching on for many reasons.

“Everybody talks about the increasing gas prices and traffic congestion,” said Rogers, who lives in West Los Angeles. “All those are great reasons to get on your bike.”

But the real reason?

“They find out it’s fun,” he said.

Like most folks, Rogers discovered the joys of bike riding as a youngster.

“Like every other kid in the 70s, I rode a bike,” he said. “I sold it when I went off to college.”

Then the 1979 film “Breaking Away” about bicycle racing came out.

“I was sitting in the movie theater and thinking how much fun I used to have on my bike. I went out and bought one.”

Before moving to Los Angeles, he rode his bike around alligators in the Louisiana bayous and the mountains and plains of Colorado.

“Denver had a great system of bike trails and paths, you could ride across the city without ever getting on the street,” he said.

In the mid-1980s, Rogers, a freelance advertising copy writer, landed in Los Angeles.

“You were lucky if you had a bike lane, let alone anything else,” he said.

The third-class bike routes the city did have were all on busy highways - “places where I’d never go on a bike,” he said.

But things have improved since then, he said.

“It’s been remarkable,” he said. “Even going back five years I remember speaking at a symposium where someone asked me a question of whether it was getting better or worse” for cyclists in Los Angeles.

“My answer was, ‘It’s getting a lot worse.’ There were virtually no bike lanes in the city, traffic was getting heavier, drivers were getting more frustrated dealing with bikes and there were a lot more confrontations and anger.

“Everything has turned around since then.”

There are several classes of bikeways, including dedicated paths and routes. “Sharrows” - asphalt markings reminding cars and bikers to share the road - are popping up on roads throughout the Southern California region.

Bike safety booklets are being produced and distributed, reminding everyone the rules of the road for both motorists and bicyclists.

Rogers credits the new awareness to the aftermath of a road rage case from 2008 in which a motorist later was convicted of deliberately stopping his car in front of two cyclists on a downhill stretch of Mandeville Canyon Road. The driver, Dr. Christopher Thompson, was sentenced to five years in prison and ordered to pay $20,000 to each of the cyclists for leal fees.
"That was front-page news but it was happening on a smaller scale every day," Rogers said.

Rogers said bike lanes - along with respect between motorists and cyclists - is making a difference, but that some areas of the city need more work.

"People tell me that the (San Fernando) Valley is not a picnic," he said.

Elliot Ir, who owns Reseda Bicycles, said streets there can be dangerous for bicyclists.

"I don't think there's much effort made by the car drivers to let bike riders ride free," he said. "There are too many incidents of hit and run, it's becoming predominant. … And obviously the Valley is getting much more congested."

The city of Los Angeles plans to add about 40 miles of bikeways a year, Freemaux said.

Among the first funded projects is a corridor along Figueroa Street between downtown and Exposition Park, which will be built over the next 18 months.

In the South Bay, a bicycle master plan also is in place to create a network of new routes, adding 213 miles of new bikeways in El Segundo, Lawndale, Gardena, Hermosa Beach, Redondo Beach and Torrance over the next 20 years.

Just this month, Manhattan Beach also signed onto the plan.

Long Beach is one municipality that already has made a concerted effort in recent years for the title of "the most bicycle friendly city in America."

The city has invested more than $20 million from state and federal grants in its bicycle infrastructure, creating more than 130 miles of bike roadways, protected bike lanes and other paths.

A green share lane along Second Street in Belmont Shore has worked out well, according to one business manager who asked that his name not be used. For the most part, he said, drivers are courteous.

"You'll see some impatient ones who swerve into the middle lane to go around them," he said. "But Long Beach is such a pro-bike and bike-friendly city."

The city of Pasadena launched its bike plan three years ago.

Rogers' main concern with the L.A. city plan is how long it will take.

"I'm going to be an 80-year-old bike rider by the time they finish" in 30 years, he said, adding that he hopes the city will find ways to expedite the process.

Cycling, said one city official, appears to be on the road to becoming a significant wave of the future.

"It's part of the urban culture," said Michelle Mowery of the Los Angeles city bike program. "It's cheap, it's economical and research is showing that more and more people under 30 are less likely to get drivers' licenses."

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