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Revelations of a curb-hopper

As long as transportation costs continue to increase, the ranks of bicycle-riding voters will grow.

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Now that spring is here I'll be riding my bike more. I want to explain my bike-riding habits: I am a curb-hopper, which means I occasionally ride my bike on the sidewalk or travel the wrong way on one-way streets -- I've even run red lights. I don't like doing these things but as long as current traffic laws put cyclists in harm's way, I'll do whatever I need to so I don't end up crushed under a truck by a driver who didn't see me.

No cyclist wants to ride on the sidewalk; it's slow and full of obstacles but when the alternative is being injured or killed by a car, I go where I have to. And to those who yell at me "It's called a sidewalk!" let me say this: if you have ever jaywalked you've given up your right to be upset. Nine times out of 10 a cyclist is on the sidewalk to avoid danger but all jaywalkers knowingly put themselves in danger for the sake of convenience (I have yet to see a cyclist yell at a jaywalker "It's called a road!"). I've even had pedestrians stand in front of me on the road, not moving, looking for a break in traffic and forcing me to swerve deeper into that traffic just to avoid them.

Another reason I curb-hop is that I am riding a bike. There's a mistaken attitude that a bike is the same as a motorized vehicle. A person on a bike has far more in common with a pedestrian than with the driver of a car. You put someone on a bike and you've increased their weight by maybe 40 pounds, given them a top speed of 30 kilometres per hour and added no protection except for a helmet. You put a person in a car and you've increased their weight by some 2,000 pounds, given them a top speed of 120 km/h and encased them in a steel frame.

I'm not saying cyclists can ride on a sidewalk the same way they do on a road; they have to be respectful of the people walking. But there's also no reason for pedestrians to treat bicycles like they are some huge danger, the most recent statistics that I could find show that in Canada, vehicles kill one pedestrian every day, on average. Bikes are not killing you, cars are; either quickly by running you down or slowly by fouling your lungs.

Governments, in the meantime, keep advocating bike riding as a fun and cheap alternative but refuse to build proper bike lanes to make it safer. It's the equivalent of telling people to go walk in traffic, but wear a helmet. What cyclists need is one uninterrupted lane that is physically separate from traffic and pedestrians. I wish painted lines were enough but drivers either don't see them or don't care.

Unfortunately, cycling gets only lip service from governments. So I've thought of three things cyclists can do to that might help light a fire under the seat of politicians:

Stop calling bicycles "alternative" transportation. It makes cycling sound weird and dangerous. From now on refer to a bike simply as transportation or non-polluting transportation.

Always wear a pollution mask. Not only is it good for your lungs, it's a nice visual reminder to drivers about how bad the air is. Take a picture of yourself in your mask in front of a local landmark and send a copy to your city's tourism board and let them know you'll be sending this photo around the Internet. Since the government won't listen to cyclists maybe the local tourist industry can encourage them to make cycling safer. (While you're at it, get an air horn; it makes people think you're a car and noise is the only offensive weapon cyclists have.)

A lot of cyclists are involved in an event called Critical Mass, where a large group of people ride bikes together. Drivers don't take this seriously; they see it as a temporary nuisance. If we really want to build an appreciation for what bicycles do then let's consider changing Critical Mass from bike-riding to car-driving. On the first workday of every month, every cyclist would drive a car into the city, to show the government how many cars aren't on the road when people ride their bikes.

One press release I read estimates there are more than 930,000 cyclists in the greater Toronto area. If only 10 per cent of those were willing to participate, that's still 93,000 cars being added to the traffic -- that should attract some attention. This, I hope, would get commuters screaming and governments seem to listen to commuters more than to cyclists. To really illustrate the point, you might put a sign in your car window that says "When you build a bike path then I'll ride my bike."

A lot of people think that cyclists make up a small minority and don't deserve much attention. Well, there are more of us than you think, and as long as gasoline, insurance and parking costs continue to increase in price the ranks of bicycle riding voters will continue to grow.

I'm not anti-car, I drive a car; cycling is simply an easier way to travel through my neighbourhood. I just don't think I should have to take my life in my hands just to get around and until the government makes it safer, I will do whatever I need to avoid being added to an already too long list of cyclists killed in traffic.

Just a side note: Drivers, when a cyclist is eyeballing you it's not an insult or a challenge, we're simply watching you to see what you're going to do. If you make a mistake in traffic it's an expense; if a cyclist makes one, it's a lot of pain and possibly death. And pedestrians, when a cyclist rings a bell, we're not giving you attitude we're just letting you know we're there.