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Share the road -- it's just the right thing to do

September 24, 2006

I was up in Portland, Ore., watching Redding natives Rachael and Megan Rapinoe play soccer -- they play for the University of Portland Pilots -- when their mom, Denise, told me some Redding cyclists had allegedly been hit by a drunk driver.

I grabbed my cell phone and called Todd Dodds (the one cyclist to end up hospitalized) and spoke with his wife -- relieved to hear he was OK. Dodds got on the phone and recounted the details. He told me drivers were honking and yelling at the downed and bloodied cyclists -- most members of the Owens Healthcare team -- to get off the road after being hit.

Since the incident, a lot of Redding cyclists (and non-cyclists) have talked to me about bicycle safety. They ask what can be done, or why are cyclists on the road in the first place.

Cycling accidents occur everywhere. Redding is not a great place to drive -- let a lone ride a bicycle -- on the street. There are designated bike lanes and routes, but they are not developed very well. For instance, the Old Alturas Bike Route is non-existent. There is a bike route sign but the pavement ends on the right side edge of the white line instead of having a two foot wide shoulder, as Class 3 bikeways call for (see the Web site referenced below).

The existing bike lanes around town are just not adequate for the growing number of commuter cyclists. The lanes here are not super-wide lanes that have an excellent surface. Bike lanes are littered with debris like broken glass, nails and dead animals.

When accidents occur, the debris is swept into the bike lane. Any debris on the roadway gets pushed into the bike lane by passing cars. The debris inevitably force cyclists to move into the lane of traffic.

Hopefully, if you see cyclists trying to avoid an obstacle in the bike lane, you'll give them a little space. The majority of the time, a driver can't see what a cyclist sees on the pavement. Small items, like a single nail, would be invisible to a motorist -- but to a cyclist it is a large object to avoid (just as drivers would try to avoid driving over broken bottles).

Bicycles aren't just for recreation. Cycling is an excellent way to commute. I've seen bicycle commuters in Redding (no, not the people jamming around town without a helmet riding against traffic, running all stop signs and lights) and they are brave; yet they see the benefit of riding a bike around town. It's faster, doesn't require gas, doesn't pollute the environment, gets you in shape and no matter what -- you always find front-row, rock-star parking.

One thing this city needs is a good trail, bike lane and path system to travel safely around town. It may lead to more people riding bikes and less people getting road rage.

Redding has a City Parks, Trails, and Open Space Master Plan that you can view at <http://ci.redding.ca.us/comsrv/pmp/index.htm>. It is a step in the right direction -- but is it enough?

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Trails are not limited to paved surfaces. North state mountain bikers deal with diminishing riding areas. As Redding continues to be developed, erosion and limited trail access become a problem. Because of the increased rate of development it is necessary to consider the importance of open space preserves.

Simply, open space is publicly owned land that is preserved from urbanization. Area 51 (a parcel of land between Swasey and Lower Springs Road that contains Gold Rush era historic water ditches) is one of those places that should be preserved -- and turned into an open space preserve. Trail users (not just cyclists) use these areas to stay off main roads and away from traffic.

Cars and bicycles can coexist together. Look at Portland. They have thousands of trails, paths, and bike lanes. They have more people commuting on bicycles than Redding has residents, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Cyclists and car-commuters co-exist in harmony.

It could happen here. But the responsibility isn't just on cyclists -- or just motorists -- to improve the situation. It's going to take an effort from everyone on the road to make things better.

I wish a speedy recovery to Dodds and all the other riders involved in the accident. What if it was your child or loved one on the side of the road that was hit by a driver? Maybe we can all share the road next time around.

Steve Tam is a member of the 2006 U.S. National Mountain Bike Team and creator of the Visenka Cycling Team; the Redding native also has a dandy little single track trail across the street from his house.

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