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In Portland, Cultivating a Culture of Two Wheels

By WILLIAM YARDLEY

PORTLAND, Ore. — Susan Peithman did not have a job lined up when she moved here in September to pursue a career in “nonmotorized transportation.” No worries, she figured; the market here is strong.

“In so many ways, it’s the center,” Ms. Peithman, 26, explained. “Bike City, U.S.A.”

Cyclists have long revered Portland for its bicycle-friendly culture and infrastructure, including the network of bike lanes that the city began planning in the early 1970s. Now, riders are helping the city build a cycling economy.

There are, of course, huge national companies like Nike and Columbia Sportswear that have headquarters here and sell some cycling-related products, and there are well-known brands like Team Estrogen, which sells cycling clothing for women online from a Portland suburb.

Yet in a city often uncomfortable with corporate gloss, what is most distinctive about the emerging cycling industry here is the growing number of smaller businesses, whether bike frame builders or clothing makers, that often extol recycling as much as cycling, sustainability as much as success.

Like the local indie rock bands that insist they are apathetic about fame, many of the smaller local companies say craft, not money, is what drives them.

“All the frame builders I know got into this because they love bikes,” said Tony Pereira, a bike builder whose one-man operation has a 10-month waiting list, “not because they wanted to start a business.”

Mia Birk, a former city employee who helped lead Portland’s efforts to expand cycling in the 1990s, said the original goals were rooted in environmental and public health, not the economy.

“That wasn’t our driving force,” Ms. Birk said. “But it has been a result, and we’re comfortable saying it is a positive result.”

Ms. Birk now helps run a consulting firm, Alta Planning and Design, which advises other cities on how to become more bicycle-friendly. In a report for the City of Portland last year, the firm estimated that 600 to 800 people worked in the cycling industry in some form. A decade earlier, Ms. Birk said in an interview, the number would have been more like 200 and made up almost entirely of employees at retail bike stores.

Now, Ms. Birk said, the city is nurturing the cycling industry, and there are about 125 bike-related businesses in Portland, including companies that make bike racks, high-end components for racing bikes, and aluminum for bikes mass-produced elsewhere. There are small operations that make cycling hats out of recycled fabric. Track, road and cyclo-cross races are held year-round, and state tourism groups promote cycling packages. There is Ms. Birk’s firm, which had two employees in Portland in 1999 and now has 14. There are nonprofit advocacy groups and Web sites, including www.bikeportland.org, that are devoted to cycling issues and events in Portland.

And then there is the growing, high-end handmade bike industry, which was made up of just one or two businesses a decade ago but now has more than 10. The Portland Development Com-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY STUART ISETT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Cyclists have long revered Portland, Ore., for amenities like on-street bicycle parking, above, and trains with spots for riders to park their bikes, below. Now, business owners like Tony Pereira, left, a bike builder, are part of the city’s growing cycling industry.



ONLINE: BIKE CITY, U.S.A.

A video exploring the bicycle culture of Portland, Ore.:
nytimes.com/national

mission is working with a handful of the bike builders to improve their business and accounting skills and help them network with one another.

This month, the city will be the host of a trade show featuring bike builders from Oregon, which locals say has more makers than any other state. And early next year, the North American Handmade Bicycle Show will bring its fourth annual event to Portland for the first time. It is expected to be the largest national show so far.

Sam Adams, a city commissioner in charge of transportation, joined development officials to help lure the show to Portland.

It seemed a natural fit. The city regularly ranks at the top of *Bicycling Magazine’s* list of the best cycling cities and has the nation’s highest percentage of workers who commute by bike, about 3.5 percent, according to the Census Bureau. Drivers here are largely respectful of riders, and some businesses give up parking spaces to make way for bike racks.

“Our intentions are to be as sustainable a city as possible,” Mr. Adams said. “That means socially, that means environmentally and that means economically. The bike is great on all three of those factors. You just can’t get a better transportation return on your investment than you get with promoting bicycling.”

Although the city has worked to help drivers and riders share roadways, two cyclists were killed in October when they were hit by trucks, and questions persist over whether enough is being

done to protect cyclists.

Mr. Adams said he was preparing a budget proposal that would spend \$24 million to add 110 miles to the city’s existing 20-mile network of bike boulevards, which are meant to get cyclists away from streets busy with cars. Doing so could “double or triple ridership,” he said.

The streets were not always so crowded with cyclists. Andy Newlands, by most accounts the first person in Portland to start making bikes by hand, got into the business in the 1970s. Back then, he said, young men would come to him for help piecing together racing bikes. Now, he said, “More and more it’s some guy with a wife and kids and a BMW and all that, and he wants a handmade bike.”

Thirty years ago Mr. Newlands sold frames for under \$300. Now a new bike might cost the buyer well over \$5,000.

“There’s so much mass-produced stuff out there that there’s just kind of a little bit of a backlash,” he said. “People like a handmade product.”

Sacha White, who was a bike messenger before he started Vanilla Bicycles, one of the most prominent bike makers in Portland, said city officials embraced not only cycling but also the niche industry that has grown out of it, something he considered striking given the size of most operations. His company, among the largest of its kind, has six employees including himself.

“I think the biggest thing that’s come from the effort the city has put into this is the vote of confidence,” Mr. White said, speaking of bike riders and bike makers. “They want us here.”

Ms. Peithman, the recent Portland arrival, had lived in Chicago until September, where she worked for the Chicagoland Bicycle Federation, a nonprofit advocacy group. She decided to move here on her own without any job prospects based “90 percent on the bike thing,” she said.

“I’m a long-term-thinking, spreadsheet kind of girl,” Ms. Peithman said. “This is the most rash thing I’ve ever done.”