

Should footpath cycling be legalised?

Published on Cycle Aware Wellington blog, May 2016; and IPENZ Transportation Group 'Roundabout' magazine, June 2016

A petition has been presented to Parliament calling for “*children under 14 years of age (and accompanying adults), seniors over the age of 65, and vulnerable users (such as those with mental or physical disabilities)*” to be able to legally cycle on roadside footpaths.

Lower Hutt mother Jo Clendon, who started this petition, seems responsible and well-intentioned, but I’m appalled and saddened that some CAN members support this. The well-respected ‘road user hierarchy’ places pedestrians at a higher priority than cyclists. Pedestrian advocacy group Living Streets Aotearoa oppose this petition.

It gets more serious, though. One of the most important findings in the history of planning for cycling was the 1996 ‘Five Point Hierarchy of Measures’, stating that the most important things which would help cyclists were to reduce the volume and then slow the speed of motor traffic. This is what needs tackling – not taking an ‘easy way out’ and transferring the threat onto an even more vulnerable group, people on foot.

This proposal is not just about ‘little kids’ avoiding busy roads. The wording above includes a very wide range. 14-year-olds aren’t ‘little’. How many ‘accompanying adults’, and what relationship to the ‘children’ (it’s not just caregivers)? How does anyone know who falls into the (rather catch-all, I would suggest) “*vulnerable users*” category. And, at age 62, will I in three years’ time become less of a threat than I am now? No – the very old will become more of a threat.

As for safety, many footpaths aren’t wide enough for safe walking, let alone cycling too. At intersections, crossing cyclists are towards the edge of a motorists’ field of vision, at just the place where motorists will be concentrating on the road traffic, so will be more liable to be hit. Cars reversing from driveways will be severely constrained from seeing footpath cyclists (sometimes they won’t see them at all), who will generally be going faster than people walking, and so less able to stop.

People (notably children) accustomed to riding on the footpath will not acquire the skills necessary to safely interact with motor traffic, meaning they will be more prone to being hit by motor traffic when they do use the roads (as inevitably they will sometimes).

There is a long and sad history of attempts to improve cyclists’ safety, and get more people cycling, through providing off-road paths. Off-road paths and ‘separated’ and ‘protected’ cycleways have a role, but they only work as part of a wider strategy, the main part of which must be reducing and slowing motor traffic. Reducing and slowing traffic is why many North European countries, Portland USA, and other places, have succeeded so dramatically, but New Zealand has not followed their lead. Places which have relied heavily on providing for cyclists off-road, like late 20th century Milton Keynes, UK, and Canberra, Australia, also invariably find strong growth of an aggressive driving culture (e.g. “*get these ***** cyclists off my road and onto their paths*”).

If the petitioners get their way, it will result in more danger, not less. More worrying to me, however, and very saddening, is that some CAN members, long accustomed to seeing themselves as the underdogs on the road, are becoming the new bullies in the playground against a group – people on foot – even more vulnerable that they are.

Roger Boulter

May 2016