SELLING BIKING:
A NEW STUDY ON THE “SWING VOTERS” OF THE STREET

peopleforbikes™
Selling biking: A new study on the “swing voters” of the street

San Francisco and Portland are celebrated as two of the best U.S. cities for biking. In fact, one in every 25 American bike commuters lives in one of these two cities.

But even in these cities’ bike-friendly neighborhoods, hundreds of thousands of people – it’s perhaps half the population – have ridden bikes before but rarely use them.

What’s stopping them?

Even if they don’t personally bike, what images make them feel best about bikes and bike infrastructure? And what messages do they feel best capture the benefits of biking to individuals and to the city?

In 2013, a first-of-its-kind study funded by the PeopleForBikes Green Lane Project in partnership with transportation departments in San Francisco and Portland, Portland-based firms NORTH and Wild Alchemy set out to find out. Using professionally facilitated focus groups and a rigorous web survey of 332 registered voters in the two cities who own bikes but didn’t ride frequently, the organizations gathered one of the fullest portraits yet of the swing voters of the bike world.

This report presents different aspects of the findings, for use by those working to broaden the coalition of support for better biking.

“We talked to people who were not daily commuters – in my words, that mushy middle that had some room to move,” Wild Alchemy principal Lynette Xanders said.

Green Lane Project program manager Zach Vanderkooy called the launching of the survey a sign of “growing sophistication” among people working to make bikes a bigger part of American city life.

“Companies invest huge amounts of money in this sort of research in order to understand their markets and how to grow them,” he said. “Political campaigns use research like this to craft effective data-driven messages to their constituents. Bicycling can benefit from the same techniques.”

To make the most of the results, we’ve also asked some national experts on biking for the lessons they see here, and we welcome you to share your own thoughts as we explore the numbers.

Some findings will be familiar to people who study bikes closely. Others will bring ideas into new light. And some may challenge your assumptions.

“On one level, it confirms that our instincts have been pretty good; it confirms a lot of what people in this world [of encouraging bike use] have figured out through trial and error,” Vanderkooy said. “Another thing it does is point out that we don’t know everything. We don’t really know in a scientific way what people are hearing when we talk about protected bike lanes or bicycling in general. So it helps us decide what the next priorities are, I think.”
Perceived safety, still the barrier that matters

To people who ride bikes in many U.S. cities, Portland and San Francisco might feel like heaven. But for the thousands of people in those cities who own bikes but don’t ride frequently, that’s far from the case.

Asked to rate the amount at which they were “concerned about safety when cycling in your city” on a scale of 1 to 5, three-quarters of such riders said they were either “very concerned” or “extremely concerned.”

The web survey, conducted in September and October 2013, followed a string of fatal collisions in San Francisco. Not surprisingly, concern was higher there: Fully 80 percent of respondents answered “very” or “extremely.” But even in Portland, which hadn’t seen a single bike fatality in more than a year, 69 percent of respondents did so.

High though that number is – a 2011 poll of San Franciscan voters in general found that 51 percent called biking in the city “unsafe” – it’s not a huge surprise. People who study biking in cities have argued for years that people who don’t frequently get around on bikes are disproportionately deterred by the notion that biking is unsafe.

About 60 percent of Portlanders “would like to ride more,” Portland bike planning coordinator Roger Geller estimated in 2005. “But they are afraid to ride.”

He dubbed these people “interested but concerned,” a label that has stuck.

If or when I ride a bike, I’m concerned about being hit by a motor vehicle

A 2012 academic study backed up Geller’s hypothesis by categorizing Portlanders according to their feelings about different kinds of street designs, then asking how much they feared auto collisions in general:
Leslie Carlson, a Portland communications consultant who often deals with bike-related messages, noted that these findings don’t show that biking in Portland and San Francisco is actually dangerous, but only that people think it is. “The perception of safety is what we’re dealing with here,” Carlson said. “If we were all concerned about actual safety, we wouldn’t drive in cars. They’re not very safe at all. But we have a seat belt and we have steel and glass around us. It makes us feel safe.”

Carlson said she thinks the solution is to create “cues for people on bikes” on the street that “make them feel better about getting on their bike.”

Jennifer Dill is a transportation planning professor at Portland State University and a leading scholar on bikeway design. Her research suggests that at least one such cue, a physically separated bike lane, is disproportionately attractive to people who fear for their safety on the road:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very Comfortable</th>
<th>Somewhat Comfortable</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>No bike facility</strong></td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No Way</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...with a bike lane</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...separated lane</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Interested but Concerned</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>No bike facility</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>...with a bike lane</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...separated lane</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>43%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Enthused and Confident</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>No bike facility</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>...with a bike lane</td>
<td>96%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>...separated lane</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Strong and Fearless</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No bike facility</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>...with a bike lane</td>
<td>97%</td>
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<tr>
<td>...separated lane</td>
<td>88%</td>
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</tbody>
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The next bit of our research backs these findings.
Bike images that people like

When street space is scarce, it’s tempting to assume that the solution is to treat road users like warring interest groups: Tom wants better driving, Dick wants better walking, Henrietta wants better biking.

On the narrow streets of Portland and San Francisco, that zero-sum thinking is a prescription for paralysis.

But what if most voters in those cities don’t experience streets as turf to be fought over? What if they see them, instead, as a part of city life that good design can improve for everyone? What if even people in those cities who rarely bike perceive images of protected bike lanes to be desirable?

They do. Overwhelmingly.

Our scientific online poll asked respondents to rate the following photos on a scale of 1 to 4 based on how each “impacts your feelings.” The results:

- Positive 90%, negative 10%
- Positive 29%, negative 71%
- Positive 78%, negative 22%
- Positive 13%, negative 87%
There’s a common thread to the popular photos, said Mary Lauran Hall, communications manager for the Alliance for Biking and Walking: Order.

“The images that are most appealing are the ones where everybody seems to be in the right place,” she said. “There’s a very clear delineation … this is where the bikes belong, and this is where the cars belong.”

Doug Gordon, a filmmaker who writes the website Brooklyn Spoke about “relaxed bicycling,” said that clarity of design, as marked by colored paint and physical separation, is the key to making biking popular.

“Those designs don’t take very long to process,” he said. “It’s, ‘Oh, I go here.’ You don’t even have to think about it. … You don’t have those few seconds when you’re rolling down the street on your bike making decisions. You just want those choices to be made very, very clear for you.”

Kristen Smith of the San Francisco Bicycle Coalition, who in June watched a series of associated focus groups work their way through the same photos, called the consensus over which photos were best “overwhelming.”

“This was across the board,” she said. “Whether you biked or didn’t bike, you got it.”
“People are really afraid of entering the space of the other, especially entering a bike space,” Smith added. “People really responded to having clear separation and not being afraid of hurting someone or being hurt. … When you see that paint, it makes it clearer for everybody. There’s no more confusion.”

Lynnette Xanders, the market researcher who led the survey and focus groups, said it was obvious that even people who never ride “weren’t angry at the idea” of high-quality bike lanes.

“In their ideal world, we are in the road safety business,” Xanders said. “Not necessarily the bicycle safety business, but road safety for all.”

Martha Roskowski, director of the Green Lane Project, warned that this study is limited in scope and that people’s reactions may be shaded by the quality of the photos as well as of the bike facilities pictured. But she said the overwhelmingly positive feelings for images of protected bike lanes suggest that street designers are offering “a great product” to the public.

“When people see it, they love it,” Roskowski said. “Next, we need more people to know about the product.”

One of the obstacles: The product – the physically separated bike lane – needs a name. And there are varying opinions on what exactly it should be.

**Better language for better bike lanes**

The new research shows that physically separated bike lanes are a solution to biking’s biggest recruitment problem, and that they can appeal emotionally even to those who rarely bike.

But what are we supposed to call them?

Randy Neufeld, founding director of Chicago’s Active Transportation Alliance, likes “advanced bike lanes.” Streetsblog religiously uses “protected bike lanes.” At the San Francisco Bicycle Coalition, “separated bike lanes” is standard. Among U.S. engineering professionals, the most common term is “cycle track,” a literal translation from the Dutch “fietspad.”

And here’s what ordinary people in San Francisco and Portland called them in a multiple-choice poll:

**We’re taking two lessons from this:**

1. Though the one option with “paths” was the most popular, most people chose some sort of variation on “lanes.”

2. “Cycle track” has simply not caught on with the general public.

Jennifer Dill said she’s recently decided not to use “cycle track” for general audiences.

“I’ve had a couple instances lately when people (not working in this field) think it means something like a velodrome, e.g. a race track setting,” Dill said.

“Protected bike lane” has downsides, too, she said. “I’m sure some people would quibble with the word “protected,” e.g. how protected is it? Some extra paint and flex posts may not seem like protection.”

Doug Gordon, who blogs about “relaxed biking” at Brooklyn Spoke, also avoids cycle track. “The two words separately, cycle and track, sound very sporty,” he said. “It’s just a really unfortunately loaded term.”

Then there’s the buffered bike lane. Gordon said he thinks these should be described as “separated” but not as “protected.”

Here at the Green Lane Project, we’ve thought about this issue a lot. And for on-street bikeways that are physically protected from auto traffic and separated from sidewalks, our style is to refer to these as “protected bike lanes.”
Here’s why:

- **Emotionally resonant:** “Protected bike lane” conveys to people, whether they’re in cars or on bikes, the reassuring feeling of safety that these lanes offer.

- **Technically precise:** “Protected bike lane” also conveys the other two key characteristics of these lanes — they’re just for bikes and they’re part of the roadway.

- **Easily modified:** One type of protected bike lane is a parking-protected bike lane. Another type is a bollard-protected bike lane. A third is a curb-protected bike lane.

- **Popular:** Among English-language news mentions tracked by mention.net, the phrase “protected bike lane” is consistently about 3.5 times more common than “separated bike lane.”

- **Non-alienating:** In focus group tests by Wild Alchemy, the word “separated” carried an undesirable connotation, while “protected” was neutral.

- **Embraced by peers:** “Protected” is the style at Streetsblog, the leading national news source on urban transportation. Various other sites have followed.

Though “cycle track” will probably remain the technical term for professionals, this survey and interviews with leaders around the country suggests an emerging national consensus around either “protected bike lane” or “separated bike lane.”

This is just the beginning of the survey and focus group’s findings about language. Among the others:

- Of 332 respondents, every single one reported positive feelings about the word “facilities.”

- “Advanced” was popular with 329 of the respondents.

- One of the most negative words, according to the group — “safe.” Twenty percent reported negative feelings about the word.

Surprised by that last finding? We were, too.

The safety paradox

When it comes to public messages about bikes, “safety” is a politically powerful cry. But the new market research shows that it can be alienating, too.

In “Perceived safety” section above, we showed the latest evidence that a perceived lack of safety on the road is a powerful factor preventing Portlanders and San Franciscans from riding bikes. We’re wrapping up our review of the data by exploring what seems like a paradox: Even though three-quarters of respondents feel unsafe on the road, the word “safety” seems to be a terrible tool for changing their minds.

Before finishing the web survey, our sample of people who own bikes but don’t ride regularly was asked to evaluate a series of concepts that communicated reasons for biking. Here’s the one that performed the best:

**Heather + Wealthier**

*Riders say they feel better physically and mentally even if they only ride instead of drive every now and then. The added exercise has a multitude of health benefits — better weight, blood pressure, and insulin levels; decreased risk of obesity and breast cancer. The stats bear out that the health benefits of cycling outweigh the risks by a factor of 20-to-one. It’s a social activity. All that, and it can save you and your family a lot of money. It’s a simple way to transform your life.*

![Chart showing 60% fits well, 30% indifferent, 10% doesn’t fit]
And here’s the one that focused on safety, with its performance:

**A safe option for everyone**

*Cities with high bicycling rates tend to have lower crash rates for all road users.* When cities invest in bike lanes, everyone wins because there is a focus on making the roads safe for all who use the cities’ streets. And the more cyclists we have, the safer it becomes because of the decrease in traffic.

An even odder finding: 20 percent of respondents said they had negative feelings about the word “safe.”

What gives?

Lynette Xanders, the pollster, said her focus groups offered a clue: Many people, including those who ride occasionally, simply don’t accept the idea that bike facilities can improve safety. Instead, they focus on education and interaction quality.

“It’s a polarizing hot button because of a lack of belief that it’s true [that bicycling is safe], and because bike lanes alone cannot make it so,” Xanders said. “They don’t believe that having them, alone, will make them safer.”

In both the Portland and San Francisco focus groups, she said, a participant had volunteered that even the best street designs “can’t fix stupid.”

For street designers and bike advocates, this creates a dilemma: In legislatures and city halls, no argument for bike facilities delivers more results than safety.

“When talking with decision-makers, safety is always going to be one of the highest priorities,” said Jeff Miller, CEO of the Washington DC-based Alliance for Biking and Walking. “Even at the local level, it’s a lot better if people are talking about safety as one of the benefits.”

But Miller said he’s persuaded that talking about safety isn’t very good at getting people on bikes, and it might even be ineffective at getting them to politically support bike infrastructure.

“We don’t need to do anything to reinforce people about the dangers of bicycling,” Miller said. “There’s already a bias way stronger than reality about how safe or dangerous bicycling is.”

Mary Lauran Hall, the Alliance’s communications manager, said her lesson from the data was “talk about safety only if you have to.”

Gordon of the blog Brooklyn Spoke said he thinks safety is “not where the bike industry and advocacy groups should ever engage people.”

“Look at the automobile industry,” Gordon said. “If they really wanted to appeal to people’s safety, they would show crash statistics, survival rates.… You don’t see that any more. You see the car parked in the driveway and the family playing catch.”

**GREEN LANE PROJECT**

The Green Lane Project is a program of PeopleForBikes, a movement to unite millions of people to improve bicycling in America. The Project helps cities build better bike lanes to create low-stress streets. We focus on protected bike lanes, which are on-street lanes separated from traffic by curbs, planters, parked cars or posts. We work closely with leading U.S. cities to speed the installation of these lanes around the country.