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Critical Mass-ively dumb

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MARK HARRISON / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Cyclists and traffic mingle daily on Dexter Avenue.

The idiotic confrontation on Capitol Hill between a frustrated driver and a few cyclists bent on retribution narrowly avoided even greater injuries than were suffered.

Better, safer cycling conditions throughout Seattle and around Puget Sound are grounded in education of cyclists and drivers alike, not the kind of lame event that spun into trouble.

Making the region a bike-friendly environment is a combination of cyclists and motorists obeying the rules of the road, and recognition they share space in broad daylight, pitch darkness and rotten weather. True progress has a undeniable political dimension.

The unfortunate meeting last Friday of a mindless fellow behind the wheel and a contagion of helmeted avengers began as a monthly ride by Seattle Critical Mass, the local chapter of a loosely organized, 16-year-old international group founded to assert the rights and presence of bicycle riders.

Dozens of cyclists swarming together means a few informal road guards to stop cars at intersections. If this were a fun, solidarity-building event with a beer in sight, that might be one thing. The smug presumption of a higher purpose is where the trouble starts.

In 2008, in a city with an expansive plan for incorporating cyclists into the transportation grid, the tactic is as fusty and clumsy as its execution.

Portland went through a recent incident with another unfortunate confluence of dim bulbs. A passer-by captured the scene of a bike rider splayed across the hood of a vehicle driven by someone not inclined to stop. Details do not inspire sympathy.

Local police restored a measure of calm after they proclaimed the event to be as odd and isolated as it sounds. The City of Roses has thousands of car-bicycle interactions a day that are uneventful and civil.

Cascade Bicycle Club is playing that mediating role in Seattle. The club has 9,000 members and is growing as fast as the appeal of cycling to work and ditching the car. Cascade issued a statement that expressed its dismay and its belief the incident should not and will not derail progress made.

Cascade was part of the political dynamic behind a bike plan embraced by City Hall. More than 133 miles of new bike facilities — routes, lanes, shared roads, boulevards and signage — are coming in the next three years. The entire plan looks out nine years and covers 365 miles.

Seattle's reputation is such that The Pro Walk/Pro Bike Conference is making a return visit for the 15th Biennial International Symposium on Bicycling & Walking. More than 1,500 design professionals are coming in September.