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Emotions still running high after Critical Mass confrontation

A local cycling advocate says participants in Seattle's monthly Critical Mass rides are doing more harm than good to the bicycling community, after a melee erupted Friday night in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood. Now, drivers and cyclists are trading insults on local blogs and news sites.

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MARK HARRISON / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Critical Mass holds monthly rides, including this one in downtown Seattle in July 2006, to draw attention to bicyclists' road rights. Some critics dismiss it as a "rolling party" that is hurting, not helping, the cause.

It's supposed to be a rolling protest, a way to show a community just how many of its citizens use two wheels instead of four.

But one local cycling advocate says participants in Seattle's monthly Critical Mass rides are doing more harm than good to the bicycling community — and may even be pushing back efforts to smooth relations between motorists and cyclists.

"Critical Mass isn't doing Seattle any good — it's a rolling party," said Chris Cameron, director of the bicycle-commute program for the 10,000-member Cascade Bicycle Club. Critical Mass rides are held monthly in cities around the world to draw attention to cyclists' road rights.

A melee erupted Friday night in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood between a motorist and a group of Critical Mass cyclists. The driver and cyclists blame each other for escalating the incident into a violent clash that sent two men to local hospitals, two men to jail and a battered Subaru Impreza to an impound yard with \$1,500 in damages.

Since then, the fight has gone online, with drivers and cyclists trading venomous insults — and offering differing versions of events — on local blogs and news sites.

Depending on who you talk to, Mark, a 23-year-old travel agent who lives on the Eastside, is either the aggressor or the victim at the center of Friday's altercation. But Tom Braun, a Seattle attorney who was run over by Mark, said the cyclists didn't provoke the fight that started when Mark floored his Subaru into a group of people.

Mark, who asked that his last name not be published because he is afraid for his safety, said Monday he found himself and a friend in an unfamiliar part of Seattle about 7 p.m. Friday as they headed to pick up another friend to go out to dinner.

Mark said Monday that he saw the mass of bicyclists and thought he'd accidentally driven into the Seafair Torchlight Parade route, so he pulled into a parking spot along Aloha Street to allow them to pass. But he said when he tried to pull back into traffic, he was blocked by cyclists who positioned themselves around his vehicle.

He admits he was angry and frustrated at being delayed — but panic and fear soon took over as the cyclists started rocking his car, saying they were going to tip it over. Mark said he revved his engine but didn't think his car was in gear. After it stalled, he restarted the engine in order to get away but says he didn't realize he hit two cyclists.

"I completely panicked and I was scared," he said. "I just felt completely cornered and threatened."

But Braun, the injured attorney, said it was Mark whom he saw acting "aggressive and belligerent" when Braun, who had been riding at the back of the Critical Mass pack, crested a hill on Aloha Street.

The Subaru was parked perpendicular to the street, and was backed over a sidewalk and someone's front lawn, said Braun, 36. He stopped and stood straddling his bike to watch as the cyclists tried to calm the driver.

"He was screaming the whole time and yelled something about being late for a [dinner] reservation — and he floors it, he literally floors it into a bunch of people and I took the brunt of it," he said.

A woman was also hit but jumped free, he said, and a man jumped onto the hood of the car to avoid being hit. But Braun — and his bike — got pulled beneath the vehicle.

"I was trying to hold onto the front and the bumper. I was pinned under the car, struggling for my life," he said. When Mark made a sharp left, a tire ran over Braun's right leg, but somehow, he managed to roll free of the car.

He didn't see what happened next.

But that's when, Mark said, he was mobbed by the cyclists, who shattered his windshield and rear window, dented the sides of his car, slashed his tires and tore off his driver's side mirror. As

he stepped out of the Subaru, someone smashed something hard across the back of his head. He later learned it was likely a bike lock. Doctors stapled the wound closed.

"I didn't start the incident — they provoked it," Mark said. "I freaked out and overreacted. I should've turned my car off and waited for them to leave."

Mark said he thinks at least some of the Critical Mass riders were looking for a fight: "They were obviously equipped and intending to get in confrontations with motorists." Still, he's sorry others were hurt: "I want to apologize to the people I hit."

Though Braun declined medical treatment at the scene, he later went to the emergency room. No bones were broken but doctors are monitoring him for possible internal bleeding, Braun said.

A Seattle police report echoes Mark's version of events, but Braun said the officer who took his statement seemed to have already made up his mind "that this mob of crazy cyclists attacked this driver out of the blue." Even after hearing Braun's story, the officer told him: "Well, this is the way it's getting written up," Braun said.

Two cyclists — a 23-year-old and a 24-year-old — were booked into the King County Jail on suspicion of malicious harassment, a felony charge connected to the damage done to the Subaru. Both have since been released after posting \$1,000 bonds, jail records show.

Seattle police are looking for a third man who is suspected of assaulting Mark with a bike lock, said police spokesman Mark Jamieson.

Like Braun, others who witnessed Friday's altercation are still shaken and say Mark should also be charged.

"I wish I didn't see this whole thing on Friday ... because it's terrifying to see someone intentionally driving into a group of bikers, and zooming off with a person on top of the car," wrote Esra, a Critical Mass participant, in an e-mail to The Seattle Times on Monday.

"I think tire slashing was a brilliant idea, but I wish nobody hit the driver on the head," wrote Esra, who asked that her last name not be published because of a fear of backlash. "I still believe, and will fight for it that driver wasn't the 'victim' and he started this whole mess, and he should be charged for what he did."

Jamieson said police commanders will look at how Critical Mass events are conducted. The investigation into Friday's incident is ongoing, and Jamieson couldn't say Monday whether Mark is likely to face charges.

Regardless of what happens in court, Cameron of the Cascade Bicycle Club said everyone involved behaved badly and is responsible for escalating the situation.

"The motorist should face charges, absolutely — he was in a 3,000-pound weapon that accelerated and hit somebody," Cameron said. "It was hooliganism on the cyclists' side, a mob mentality. They overreacted."

Still, he thinks tension between motorists and cyclists has actually decreased in recent years as drivers have become more accustomed to sharing the road with bicyclists.

Friday's clash "was an aberration," said Cameron. He said local Critical Mass rides haven't done anything to improve conditions for the riding public.

"It's kind of a merry pranksters event in Seattle versus the rolling protest I believe the original founders of the movement wanted to communicate," he said.

A Web site about Critical Mass events around the world — critical-mass.info — states that the monthly rides along urban streets are "intended to be a celebration, not an opportunity to cause trouble.

"Those who want to try to tie up traffic as much as possible and be confrontational with motorists are missing the point," the Web site states. "We can assert our right to the road without being rude about it. Focus on the ride, not on the cars that also happen to be on the road."

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