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Critical Mass incident sparks safety conversation

By Sasha London

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While some Seattle cyclists believe Critical Mass participants were too aggressive during the July 25 incident at 14th Avenue East and East Aloha Street, many feel the intentions of the group remain positive.

The incident, which received a great deal of publicity, resulted in the arrests of two Critical Mass cyclists, several injuries, a damaged bike, a damaged vehicle and a lot of concerned cyclists.

"It makes me a little scared that a driver will see someone on a bike and take their feelings out on me," said Sylvie Janecek, who began biking seriously about five months ago. "That's the thing that worries me the most."

Cyclists in the group were performing a technique called "corking," which involves a few cyclists blocking traffic so other riders can safely pass, according to Seattle resident Scott Gamble, who participated in the Critical Mass ride.

The driver of the vehicle reportedly became frustrated at being delayed.

"We are concerned that the driver, who (reportedly) ran over a couple of people, made a four-point turn and he's not being prosecuted," said David Hiller, advocacy director of the Cascade Bicycle Club.

Hiller participated in Critical Mass before joining Cascade. He said the Cascade Bicycle Club, whose mission is to get more people riding more safely, cannot support Critical Mass because they break the law each time they run a stop sign or red light.

"Cascade supports lawful riding," said Hiller. "Whenever you participate in some sort of social protest, there are issues involved and consequences that can be sanctioned. Whether that's a ticket for running a stop sign, or something else, they have to take that into consideration."

Still, he said he believes Critical Mass intentions are good.

"My first Critical Mass ride was in 1993 in Washington, D.C. I rode with about 40 people and it was empowering, fun and it did draw attention to disparities," he said.

Gamble started cycling about a year and half ago and has participated in every Critical Mass since.

"Critical Mass is to foster community," he said. "It's a celebration, and it's about raising awareness among motorists."

Gamble said the response he received on his blog (sweetbike.org) was mixed but mostly negative toward Critical Mass.

"I understand CM's logic about traffic overall moving faster if you just let the entire group go by," said one blogger known as Arentol. "However, that logic does not, in fact, give bikers the right to break any law at any time,"

"Stopping him [the driver] from barreling through a bunch of cyclists seemed like a reasonable exercise of this responsibility, no?" said Scott, another blogger. "I think he could/would have caused a lot more damage than he did."

Gamble remains a proponent of Critical Mass and said that level of aggression is unusual on the monthly rides:

"We're just moving through and we're just riding bikes," he said. "I started cycling because of Critical Mass. I think it does good."

Capitol Hill resident Jeff Cochran is a Slow Sunday rider; Slow Sunday is a group that also stages group rides, but ones that do not purposefully break the law. He questioned the intention of Critical Mass. "I've heard of people having to wait in traffic for about 20 minutes during the protest. Twenty minutes is a long time to hold up traffic," he said.

"How is that any different than being caught in rush-hour traffic?" asked another Slow Sunday cyclist, who declined to give her name.

Ryan Handscheg, who participates in Critical Mass, said it is unfortunate that a select few have given the group a bad name.

"The kind of people I ride with will call people out on the bikers who are doing the wrong thing," Handscheg said.

Cochran said he read many blogs about the incident and is worried that the organization is out of control.

"If they got their act together, it would be okay, but right now it's very dangerous. There are a lot of people who don't obey stop signs and traffic signals. Someone could die," he said.

While many disagree about the effectiveness of Critical Mass, they agree on one thing: biking conditions in Seattle are dangerous.

"More roadwork needs to be done," said Adam Currie, who rides casually. "Especially on Capitol Hill."

"The roads are not paved well, but the traffic here moves a little slower so in that regard it's a little safer," said Sean Kelly, who recently moved to Seattle from Berkeley, Calif. Kelly said that although he's had no close calls yet, it's very easy for drivers to miss cyclists.

"I don't think anyone is satisfied as to where we are yet," Hiller said, adding that the Cascade Bicycle Club is working with the city to complete a Bicycle Master Plan that will improve biking conditions.

"Hopefully we will make some major progress," he said. "There will be new facilities, road trails, additional bike parking and hundreds of new racks. We've really picked up the pace."

With the cost of gas continuing to rise, the number of cyclists is sure to increase. Motorists, cyclists and pedestrians will have to find some way to share the road safely.

"There are more people biking now and there will be more soon," Janecek said. "People who are driving are going to need to be more aware."

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