

Published Letters to the Editor in the *Huntsville Times*

November 30, 2001

New Century of Travel

I would like to respond to the comment in the Nov. 23 "Talk to *The Times*" titled "Make bicyclists pay." The reader does not understand the issue.

- Gas and vehicle taxes do not pay the entire transportation budget. If these taxes were relied on along, gas would be extremely expensive and cars would cost thousands more.
- Cyclists own cars, buy gas, pay income and sales taxes. We pay our fair share of the transportation budget.
- Road improvements for bicycles pale in comparison to the cost of building more roads. The cost of \$15,000 for 143 miles is a bargain compared to the city's streets and bridges budget.
- The city's Capital Improvement Plan, which funds bicycle and road projects, is primarily funded by sales tax.
- Cycling reduces traffic congestion, requiring fewer new roads and reducing wear and tear on existing ones.
- Cycling is the second most popular form of transportation, according to a recent federal study, more popular than public transportation.
- Bicycle plans are required by federal law in order for cities and states to receive federal funding for roads.
- Cycling is healthy, economical, and environmentally friendly form of transportation.

Huntsville is taking a step into the 21st century with these bicycle improvements. Without them, we will be choking in traffic in the years to come.

David Stone, Huntsville

Stone is community affairs advisor for the Spring City Cycling Club.

February 24, 2002

Alternate Transportation

Two articles in the Feb. 10 edition of "The Times" caught my attention.

The first detailed Huntsville receipt of a grant for landscaping the interchange at Interstate 565 and Research Park Boulevard.



David Stone, LCI #1244
League Cycling Instructor, Huntsville, AL
(256) 348-6414 (cell)
BikeEd-HSV@knology.net
www.knology.net/~BikeEdHSV/courses.htm
10/13/05

The second in the Outlook 2002 section described how automobiles overrun Huntsville.

Why are these two article related?

Landscaping funding comes form the transportation enhancement budget, a special set-aside of federal funding managed by the state. The state estimates \$74 million in transportation enhancement funding over the next five years. This budget also funds bicycle facilities.

Huntsville needs more bicycle facilities and the city and state recognize that. Huntsville recently approved the new bike plan and request a grant to install bike lanes on Bankhead Parkway. Alabama Department of Transportation installed shoulders on Four Mile Post and plans to add them during the Martin Road widening project.

Hopefully more facilities will follow, but at current funding levels it will take years before a useful system is in place. We should not be satisfied with current funding levels and ask ourselves if we should be funding aesthetic improvements when utilitarian improvements are needed in a city overwhelmed by automobiles.

Landscaping is nice, but better transportation alternatives should be our priority.

David Stone, Spring City Cycling Club, Huntsville

September 11, 2002

Safe bicycling

Co-workers, neighbors and others I meet all believe that I take unnecessary risks by riding my bicycle on the roads of Huntsville. Most expect me to be run over by a menacing motorist at any moment. Media articles tout the dangers of mixing motorists and cyclists. Motorists yell about cyclists being the problem, cyclists yell about motorists.

Most of us are taught as children that bicycles and cars don't mix; riding on the sidewalk is safer. This perceptions stay with us as adults. However, most of this is wrong. The fatality rate for bicycles has remained around 2 percent of all traffic fatalities. This equates to 728 fatalities out of 42,116 nationwide in 2001. There were 4,882 pedestrian fatalities.

Accounting for children and those do not know how to ride properly or do not wear helmets, the fatality rate for experienced cyclists is low. Taking into consideration other



David Stone, LCI #1244
League Cycling Instructor, Huntsville, AL
(256) 348-6414 (cell)
BikeEd-HSV@knology.net
www.knology.net/~BikeEdHSV/courses.htm
10/13/05

fatality causes, cycling is not that deadly. In 2000, 8 Alabamians died on bicycles. Just this year 6 died after being struck by lightning. Now accidents can and do happen, there is no way around that. Certain decisions increase the risk of an accident. Education is the key to dispelling inaccurate perceptions and avoiding unnecessary risk. However, cycling is a safe form of transportation if you know the rules of the road.

David Stone, Huntsville

David Stone is community affairs advisor for the Spring City Cycling Club.

January 28, 2003

Sidewalk cyclists

On Jan. 6, The Times published a photograph of a cyclist riding down the sidewalk on Bailey Cove.

While the caption admired his dedication for riding in the cold, what it did not list was the unnecessary risk he was taking by riding on the sidewalk.

The truth is that sidewalks are more likely to result in an accident between a bicycle and automobile than if the bicycle is riding in the road with traffic. Why? Visibility.

Sidewalks reduce the cyclist's visibility to crossing traffic. Statistics show that 90 percent of bicycle accidents involve crossing traffic, not overtaking traffic.

They also estimate that sidewalks increase the risk of an accident over four times, depending on the cyclist's direction of travel. Motorists coming out of or into side streets are not expecting cyclists traveling on sidewalks, especially if they are riding against traffic.

Many people feel that sidewalks are safer, and inadequate roads and a lack of safety education fuel this misperception.

Also consider that cyclists can easily exceed 20 mph and the risk this poses to pedestrians.

Children are the only exception to riding on sidewalks. They should be kept on sidewalks until between 10 and 12 years old and then taught the rules of the road for riding in the roadway with traffic.



David Stone, LCI #1244
League Cycling Instructor, Huntsville, AL
(256) 348-6414 (cell)
BikeEd-HSV@knology.net
www.knology.net/~BikeEdHSV/courses.htm
10/13/05

When in the roadway, the cyclist is considered a vehicle that follows the same rules that all vehicles must follow. Unfortunately, some local cyclists have learned the hard way about sidewalk dangers.

David L. Stone, Huntsville

May 17, 2003

Mixed-use trails

Before we start talking about building new greenways, we need to talk about safety on our current greenways.

Almost every time I use my local greenway, I see accidents waiting to happen. Mixing pedestrians, bicycles, rollerbladers and pets can have serious consequences.

Many experienced cyclists will not use mixed-use trails because the risk of an accident with other bicycles, pedestrians, or pets increases compared to riding with traffic on the roads. Pedestrians make sudden, unexpected maneuvers into the paths of bicycles, resulting in collisions.

Children are especially susceptible to running in front of other traffic. Not long ago I witnessed a toddler on a tricycle pull right in front of a passing cyclist. Bicycles travel at high speeds, easily exceeding 20 mph on level ground.

The greenways have markings for pedestrians and bicycles to separate the two, but this is easier said than done. Each group should work to remain on their designated side of the trail.

Pedestrians should look behind them before moving onto the bicycle side of the trail. Cyclists should slow down and announce themselves before passing pedestrians from behind.

Pets should be kept on short leashes and never allowed to run free to prevent them running in front of bicycle traffic. Care should be exercised when entering or leaving the trail, especially at the middle access points.



David Stone, LCI #1244
League Cycling Instructor, Huntsville, AL
(256) 348-6414 (cell)
BikeEd-HSV@knology.net
www.knology.net/~BikeEdHSV/courses.htm
10/13/05

Pay attention when using our greenways, because when collisions occur between bicycles and other greenway users, everybody loses.

David L. Stone, Huntsville

June 23, 2003

Please, wear a helmet

Two tragic bicycle fatalities recently should be a reminder to all about the importance of wearing a helmet when riding.

Bicycle helmets are the single most effective safety measure if you have an accident. The Bicycle Helmet Safety Institute estimates that 88 percent of traumatic head injuries are preventable if wearing a helmet and two thirds of bicycle fatalities are the result of traumatic head injuries.

In Alabama it is illegal for a child under the age of 16 to ride without a helmet, but it does not take a rocket scientist to know that you should wear one regardless of age or where you ride. Whether you ride with traffic in the roadway, take your local greenway or are the youngster riding on the sidewalk, a momentary lapse of concentration can cause a loss of control and send you towards the pavement.

And guess what? Whether you are 6 or 60, the ground is just as hard.

The majority of bicycle accidents are falls from the bicycle, followed equally by collisions with motor vehicles, pedestrians, bicycles and pets.

Newer helmets are lighter, cooler, and fit better than ones you tried years ago. Make sure you buy one that is certified and wear it properly. If you are not sure if your helmet is properly fitted, stop by your local bicycle shop and ask for help from their professionals.

David L. Stone, Huntsville



David Stone, LCI #1244
League Cycling Instructor, Huntsville, AL
(256) 348-6414 (cell)
BikeEd-HSV@knology.net
www.knology.net/~BikeEdHSV/courses.htm
10/13/05

August 21, 2003

Words of thanks

The morning of July 24, I was hit by a car while riding my bicycle to work. My injuries were serious, but now I am well on the road to recovery. I wanted to take a moment to thank everybody who helped in some form as a result of this accident:

- A co-worker, walking her dog, who was one of the first on the scene.
- A good Samaritan motorist who stopped to help.
- An apartment resident who called 911.
- HEMSI paramedics.
- Top-notch Huntsville Hospital doctors, nurses, and staff that fixed what was broken and did it with tender, loving care.
- A loving wife.
- Family who dropped everything and traveled across the country to help.
- An optometrist best friend whose skills are fantastic.
- Spring City Cycling Club members who helped figure out what happened.
- The Huntsville Times for writing a nice article.
- Friends and co-workers who called and visited to wish me a speedy recovery.
- A surprise visit from a city council member.
- Neighbors who mowed the lawn.
- The powers of prayer and the Internet.
- A little luck.
- A lot of divine intervention.



David Stone, LCI #1244
League Cycling Instructor, Huntsville, AL
(256) 348-6414 (cell)
BikeEd-HSV@knology.net
www.knology.net/~BikeEdHSV/courses.htm
10/13/05

There are more to thank than I can here. I will continue to cycle when I am able. I will continue my advocacy work and you can be sure that I will continue to write letters to the editor about bicycle safety.

David L. Stone, Huntsville

October 14, 2003

Making better drivers

The Times' editorial on Oct. 9 got it right. The solution to traffic problems is not just more roads, but better transportation. However, there was one thing the editorial failed to address: the effect of bad drivers on traffic and transportation alternatives.

Any viable transportation system includes bicycles, but most people will not cycle due to fear of bad drivers. Recent accidents underscore this point.

First, I was hit and seriously injured by a distracted driver while cycling to work in July. Then a drunk driver killed a cyclist in Scottsboro in September. Two serious accidents in such a short time involving experienced, safety-conscious cyclists are off the charts according to accident statistics.

It is not just cyclists impacted by bad drivers. The biggest cause of traffic delays is bad drivers. The latest traffic fatality statistics show more drunk drivers are killing more people on our roads.

People tend to forget that driving is a privilege. Just like the separation of church and state, the constitution does not mention anything about a right to drive. However, it would probably be easier to take away someone's right to vote than his or her driver's license.

Maybe we should start solving our transportation issues by not spending millions on more roads, but spend it making better drivers.

David L. Stone, Huntsville



David Stone, LCI #1244
League Cycling Instructor, Huntsville, AL
(256) 348-6414 (cell)
BikeEd-HSV@knology.net
www.knology.net/~BikeEdHSV/courses.htm
10/13/05

November 24, 2003

Turn on the lights

Warm fall temperatures are great for cycling, but the short days cause a problem.

Too many people ride in the dark without lights.

Riding at night without lights is not only illegal, but also incredibly stupid. People incorrectly assume that federally mandated reflectors are sufficient to make them visible to motorists. Since most accidents involve crossing traffic, these riders do not realize that the cars' headlights will not hit the reflectors until just before they get hit, even if riding on the sidewalk.

Visibility is the key to safe cycling and lights are the best way to make cyclists visible to everyone when it is dark. Alabama Code 32-5A-265 requires bicycles riding at night to have a headlight and red rear reflector. It also strongly recommends a taillight.

Headlights can be easily added for less than \$30 to several hundred dollars for more advanced models. Taillights run under \$15.

No matter where you ride, if you are riding at night around the neighborhood, to the store, or on your way home from work, make sure you are properly equipped.

David L. Stone, Huntsville

January 1, 2004

Require bike parking

Parking is always at a premium during the holidays. Unfortunately, bicycle parking is at a premium any time of the year.

Most people travel only a couple of miles from their home to run an errand, a perfect distance to use a bicycle instead of the car. Despite Huntsville's efforts to make the roads friendlier for cycling, there are few places worth going without risking your transportation to theft.

The FBI reports that 400,000 bicycles are stolen each year. The actual number may be twice that.



David Stone, LCI #1244
League Cycling Instructor, Huntsville, AL
(256) 348-6414 (cell)
BikeEd-HSV@knology.net
www.knology.net/~BikeEdHSV/courses.htm
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The hard thing to understand is that businesses spend thousands catering to motorists with drive-through banking, dining, pharmacies and dry cleaning. They spend on average \$2,200 per space in parking lots they could never fill. However, a \$150 rack that fits five bikes is neglected.

They may argue that too few cycle to make it worthwhile. The truth is that too few run errands by bicycle because facilities do not exist. The ideal solution is for the city to require bike parking as part of its zoning ordinances. That is what most bicycle-friendly cities do.

David L. Stone, Huntsville

February 12, 2004

Insurance enforcement

I hope the Legislature is bold enough to do something about Alabama's disgraceful uninsured motorist law.

In September, the state admitted it did not have enough money to enforce the law. If there is no money to enforce this law, why do we even have it? What other laws should we not enforce due to a lack of money?

There is no reason for a driver not to show proof of insurance when he or she registers a car. Right now you just tell the clerk that you have insurance with no proof that you actually do.

The penalties also need to be increased. The lady who hit me last summer got a \$500 fine while my medical bills are expected to reach hundreds of thousands of dollars. It is cheaper to pay the fine than get the insurance. Should somebody with no insurance that is involved in a near fatal collision still be allowed to drive?

The Legislature must start taking its responsibility to regulate driving seriously. Right now it is a joke.

David L. Stone, Huntsville



David Stone, LCI #1244
League Cycling Instructor, Huntsville, AL
(256) 348-6414 (cell)
BikeEd-HSV@knology.net
www.knology.net/~BikeEdHSV/courses.htm
10/13/05

April 12, 2004

Safe cycling

Do you know where the safest place to ride a bicycle is? Safety studies show, time and time again, that riding in the road with traffic is the safest place for adults.

But where in the road are you supposed to be? Alabama law states that a bicycle is to ride as far right as "practicable." Does practicable mean as far right as possible?

No, it does not. Evaluations of this law determined that no definition of practicable could be given. It depends on the circumstances.

However, the cyclist is not the one responsible for moving out of the way of overtaking traffic. The courts determined that is the responsibility of the overtaking vehicle to ensure there is adequate room to pass safely regardless of where the cyclist is.

The League of American Bicyclists recommends the right third of the right lane; essentially the right tire mark, except if circumstances require riding further to the left. This is necessary when making a left turn, encountering road debris, at stop signs or lights, in slow moving traffic or when it is too narrow for cars to safely pass in the same lane.

Cyclists should take the lane when conditions call for it. Riding to the right is common courtesy, but courtesy does not take precedence over safety.

Cyclists cannot be expected to ride so close to the edge as to risk being run off the road.

David L. Stone, Huntsville

May 22, 2004

Cycling and safety

Gas prices are astronomical. We lead the nation in diabetes and are second in obesity. If this is not the time to get out and do something, I do not know what you are waiting for.

May 21 is National Bike to Work Day. Cycling to work is an excellent way to save money, get a workout and clean up the air.



David Stone, LCI #1244
League Cycling Instructor, Huntsville, AL
(256) 348-6414 (cell)
BikeEd-HSV@knology.net
www.knology.net/~BikeEdHSV/courses.htm
10/13/05

Many people do not consider a bicycle a viable means of transportation. However, cycling to work is easier than you think.

Short on time? It actually saves time by combining a workout and commuting.

Live too far away? Drive part of the way and ride the rest.

Errands to run? The post office, bank, grocery store or video store can easily be visited on a bicycle. If you need to, you can even get the kids to day care.

Wear a suit? Take it in the day before.

Worried about safety? Following the rules of the road, a concept called vehicular cycling, vastly reduces the risk of an accident. If you are still not convinced do us a favor, today and every day: Drive safely! Share the road, obey the speed limit, get off the cell phone and pay attention.

David L. Stone, Huntsville

August 6, 2004

Responsible drivers

Editorial Page Editor John Ehinger's column on Sunday, Aug. 1, makes a good point. Drivers must be more responsible.

While increasing the number of officers on patrol is one solution to reduce speeding, increasing the penalties is another. Former congressman William Janklow reportedly said a few days in jail instead of fines for one of his 13 previous speeding tickets might have gotten him to slow down before he ended up killing somebody last year.

Maybe penalties like that will get motorists to drive responsibly? Maybe a fine of \$500 for going 10 mph over the speed limit is a start? Go 15 mph over and it goes to \$1,000. More than 15 mph means thousands in fines and license suspension.

Also reckless driving, no insurance, red light runners and DUI should be license suspensions. Then throw them in jail if they drive on a suspended license.

Use the money from the fines for better education and training for all drivers. We take our responsibilities while driving far too casually. We forget that it is a privilege.



David Stone, LCI #1244
League Cycling Instructor, Huntsville, AL
(256) 348-6414 (cell)
BikeEd-HSV@knology.net
www.knology.net/~BikeEdHSV/courses.htm
10/13/05

David L. Stone,
Huntsville, 35803

October 8, 2004

Tired of bad drivers?

I can only come to one conclusion after reading the various articles, editorials, and comments concerning roundabouts: Roundabouts are good, but Alabama drivers are too dumb to figure them out.

As a cyclist, I am constantly told that people would cycle more if drivers were better. So I ask this question: How much more regulation would you tolerate to get bad drivers off the road?

I am reminded of how the federal government regulates pilots. Both driving and flying are privileges with serious consequences if the rules are not followed.

Would drivers submit to extensive and expensive training requirements? Would they go for regular driving evaluations and medical exams? Would they cringe at special training for driving sports cars or other "high performance" vehicles? Would they tolerate an additional license to drive in bad weather?

These are things private pilots must do. Commercial and air transport license requirements are even more extensive. Considering there were only 626 general aviation fatalities in 2003 compared with 42,623 motor vehicle fatalities, it may be what is needed.

I doubt many would set foot in an airplane if pilots had to do as little as drivers to earn and maintain their licenses. Call the governor and your legislator and ask them to take action.

David L. Stone,
Huntsville, 35803



David Stone, LCI #1244
League Cycling Instructor, Huntsville, AL
(256) 348-6414 (cell)
BikeEd-HSV@knology.net
www.knology.net/~BikeEdHSV/courses.htm
10/13/05

December 21, 2004

Bicycle safety

It is Christmastime and lots of boys and girls are hoping Santa will put a bright shiny bicycle under the tree. However, before Santa starts his work, Mom and Dad should take these into consideration before the child gets on a bike:

Bicycles are not toys; they are vehicles. Under Alabama law, they have all the responsibilities as any vehicle on the road. They should be treated with respect.

Helmets are not optional. Alabama law requires children under 16 to wear a helmet. It should fit properly and not be worn back on the head. A helmet reduces the risk of a head injury by 85 percent. It does not matter where your child rides, either. Fifty percent of bicycle accidents are falls from the bicycle. If your child does not wear a helmet, take the bike away.

Does your child know how to cycle safely? Do you know how to teach them? There are programs to teach children and parents bicycle safety. In collisions between children and motorists, the child is typically at fault.

Is the bike in good working order? Check the tires, brakes, chain, handlebars, and other equipment before letting your child ride. If repairs are needed, take the bike to a local shop for a tune-up.

Cycling is a fun and enjoyable activity. Take these precautions to prevent your child from unnecessary accidents.

David L. Stone, Huntsville, 35803

David L. Stone is a cycling instructor of the League of American Bicyclists.



David Stone, LCI #1244
League Cycling Instructor, Huntsville, AL
(256) 348-6414 (cell)
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