



Twin Cities Dealer Tour



Photos by Jake Orness

Minneapolis Impresses With Vibrant Bike Culture

BY MEGAN TOMPKINS

On the surface, Minneapolis is a city in which few retailers in other parts of the country would envy running a bike shop. Those who have only made the annual pilgrimage to the Twin Cities for Quality Bicycle Products' open house know little about the bike facilities buried beneath the ice and snow in February.

"We're one of the most seasonal markets—though I haven't been to Buffalo, New York," said Erik Saltvold, owner of Erik's Bike Shop, with 13 stores in the greater Twin Cities area.

But this unassuming region that is home to 2.85 million people is not unlike its residents: a modest, hard-working bunch, who speak humbly about their own accomplish-

ments but beam with pride talking about their city.

And with good reason. Minneapolis boasts 40 miles of dedicated bike lanes and 83 miles of off-street bike paths. That enviable infrastructure has spawned a vibrant and varied cycling culture that defies harsh winters and geographic obstacles such as lakes, wetlands and the Mississippi River.

The dozen-or-so riders that traversed the city over the course of three days in June for the BRAIN Dealer Tour experienced some of the best weather the city has to offer. But sunshine and mild temperatures aside, all agreed that the Twin Cities had plenty to offer cyclists.

Continued on page D-12

Minneapolis...

Continued from page DT-1

Chief among them: a robust and diverse array of more than 60 bike shops satisfying the whims and preferences of every cyclist. It is a crowded, competitive retail environment but storeowners are friendly with one another. They talk. They swap stories. They work together toward a shared goal of getting more people on bikes.

“One of the great things is everyone is really civil. We know we’re in this together,” said Gene Oberpriller, owner of One on One Bicycle Studio.

A few shared experiences of retailing in the Twin Cities rose to the surface during our store visits:

- The selling season is short and retailers need to be ready with product on hand when the weather breaks or they’ll never make up lost ground.

- Minnesotans are a hearty bunch. Perhaps as a legacy of common Scandinavian heritage, they’re willing to ride year-round despite the frigid winters.

- The downtown has a vibrant fixie and single-speed scene that eclectic urban shops like The Hub Bike Co-op and One on One Bike Studio have tapped into.

- Successful storeowners like Erik Saltvold got their start fixing up and reselling second-hand bikes. Used bike sales and trade-in programs still abound in the area proving the old adage, “One person’s trash is another person’s treasure.”

- Basements, a fixture in Midwest cycling shops, are hidden treasure troves for bike collectors.

- Quality Bicycle Products is a major perk; it serves as a secondary warehouse for many local shops with same-day shipping.

- Bianchi has surprisingly strong market penetration due, some suggested, to a successful longtime sales rep.

- The Big Three—Trek, Specialized and Giant—have put their stakes in the ground, creating strong partnerships and launching concept stores with market leaders.

- The dominance of these few brands has led some retailers to worry that the market is becoming homogenized. It’s a legitimate concern.

But this retail market retains its unique character and charm through its diverse array of stores. Shops have found success by carving out specific niches and carrying unique brands and products.

Those that continue to differentiate themselves with their product mix and focus will satisfy this city’s large and diverse group of cyclists.



Used bike sales and trade-in programs abound in this seasonal market.

City Leaders Hope If They Build It, Cyclists Will Come

BY MEGAN TOMPKINS

Watch out Portland: Minneapolis has you in its sights.

Minneapolis is now the nation’s No. 2 bike-commuting city second only to Portland among cities with commuters who bike to work, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

And the city is taking aim at the top slot. As the city’s cycling mayor, R.T. Rybak, joked to the group of riders assembled at Freewheel Midtown Bike Center, “Portland is just a street in Minneapolis.”

The U.S. Census Bureau reported that the number of Minneapolis resi-

dents who biked to work in 2007 increased 49 percent over the previous year, with 7,200 people commuting by bike. That amounts to 3.8 percent of the city’s commuters, up from about 4,840—or 2.5 percent—in 2006.

The mode share increase suggests that large-scale investments in cycling infrastructure in Minneapolis in recent years are working to get more people on bikes.

“It might not work everywhere, but when you’ve got willing city engineers and political will, it will happen—even in a cold weather climate,” said Gary Sjoquist, advocacy director for Quality Bicycle Products.

Sjoquist said the city of Minneapolis and Hennepin County supported bicycling projects going back to the 1980s. But he said the climate for cycling interests really warmed when residents elected Rybak, a triathlete and a staunch advocate for cycling, for his first term in 2001.

“If you’ve got a mayor who wants to run with it, city councilmen who will stand behind it and city engineers who put in the time and funds to match state funding, I think you’ll see results,” Sjoquist said.

Dealer Tour participants experienced those results

first-hand as Sjoquist led the group around the city, taking advantage of the city’s dedicated bike-ped bridges and greenways.

The city’s showpiece is the Midtown Greenway, an 8.4-mile former railroad corridor dubbed the “bicycle freeway.” Built in three stages, with the first phase completed in 2000, it cost about \$9 million including land acquisition. Bicycle counts indicate that bicycle use is increasing on the corridor at a substantial rate.

For the period of March through June, bicycle traffic increased by 25 percent from 449,996 trips in 2007 to 563,688 trips in 2008.

“That’s a special facility but it shows it can be done. Thousands of people use that greenway to commute. It proves what we’ve been saying: people will change, they will move to using bicycles more,” Sjoquist said.

The city’s latest triumph is the Sabo Bridge, a stunning \$5 million bike and pedestrian bridge that extends the Midtown Greenway across a major six-lane

traffic artery to the Mississippi river. Opened in May 2008, Sjoquist said it was an important step toward eventually extending the Midtown Greenway farther east to St. Paul.



Gary Sjoquist, advocacy director for Quality Bicycle Products, knows his way around the city’s many bike-ped bridges and greenways. He lent his street smarts to the Dealer Tour crew, leading the ride on all three days.



No, that’s not a peace sign, that’s Gary Sjoquist pointing out that Minneapolis is the nation’s No. 2 bike commuting city, thanks to the help of Mayor R.T. Rybak (on right).

Sjoquist acknowledged that spending \$5 million on a bike-ped facility was not without some controversy.

“But in this particular case it was a major barrier. People were not comfortable trying to cross that huge stretch with kids and with trailers,” he said, adding that city planners are accustomed to working around barriers such as the Mississippi River.

“I think it’s one of the important things to note in Minneapolis—we understand how to cross barriers. That goes back to political will.”