



## Where Boston's bikers go to retire

by Pete Stidman  
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Chris Grealish's first thoughts of leaving Boston were inspired by bone-crushing accidents. In his three years riding as a courier he received a broken collar bone, a demobilizing blow to the hip, stitches on a gruesomely torn upper lip, lost skin on his hands, legs and arms, and a knee swelled up to the size of a grapefruit. Instead of vacations, Grealish was often forced to take unpaid downtime to heal his wounds. He claims he averaged one accident or serious altercation with a cabdriver every three months.

Yet he loved the job.

"I had no formal education. I found something that I wanted to do and I was really good at it. Having that taken away was pretty alarming," says Grealish 42, "It became very apparent that my shelf life was limited."



In 1987 he took his first actual vacation in Boulder, Colo. "I came out here, saw the bike lanes, the mountains, and the friendly people and I said wow! I'd rather be a dishwasher here and get to ride my bike in peace than deal with the rat race that I was immersed in back in Boston."

Boulder, even at that time, was well on its way to becoming one of the most bike friendly cities in the country. The city is now so amenable to two wheelers that the League of American Bicyclists awarded them a gold medal last May, one of only four handed out nationwide.

In contrast, Boston was rated the least bike-friendly city in the country by *Bicycling* magazine in 1999 and still hasn't taken any significant action to improve its record.

In 1987, Grealish moved to Boulder and started a courier business. He worked nights and weekends at another job to keep it afloat. "Anyone in their right mind would have quit and done anything else." He says, "I just didn't know any better." But he enjoyed riding in a place where he didn't have to worry about becoming a human pinball. After two and a half years of struggle a

resurgent economy finally caught up with Grealish's idea and his services were in demand. Today, his company now operates in Boulder and nearby Denver making over 10,000 deliveries a month and supporting 55 employees.

Boulder and Boston both have a median age close to 30, both have sizable college enrollments per capita, and both have convenient geographic layouts for bikers. So why does Boulder crank out biking infrastructure like John Henry did rails when, as MassBike, Massachusetts' statewide bicycle advocacy organization, points out, Boston can only claim two city blocks of on-street bike lanes?

"Boston has a bike community with some really incredible people." Theorizes Grealish, "There's a framework of advocacy there. Here [in Boulder], it's just a shitload of people on bikes. It's woven into the fabric of the community." According to Boulder's 2003 surveys, 14% of all resident trips are traveled on bikes, but this is a 4.9% increase over 1990 numbers, so there was not always a "shitload." Transit is rising too, and the number of trips for single occupancy vehicles has come down 5.2%. Boston's planning commission, the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, does not even measure bicycle ridership numbers, making comparisons difficult.

Marni Ratzell, Boulder's Bicycle/Pedestrian coordinator, says bike use in Boulder is up partly because of conscious changes in planning. "When a reconstruction project happens here, it's how are we going to accommodate the bikes and the pedestrians, not can we, should we, will we." By comparison, Bicycle advocates are still struggling to get road designers to accommodate bicycles, much less the actual crews who construct them.

The buzzword in the city's "GOBoulder" planning office is "multi-modal corridor" (another way of saying "complete streets" which is heard in planning offices around the country). Planners hope to ease congestion and demand for car lanes by creating streets designed to accommodate all forms of transportation, including what they call ABC bicyclists; Advanced, Beginners, and Children. Laws and driver education give advanced riders better ability to ride in traffic, and beginners and children can feel safe on the many off-street "multi-use paths." Today 78% of all Boulder's arterials have bike lanes or multi-use paths running alongside of them, adding up to over 350 miles of bike paths and on-street lanes.

In turn, Grealish's couriers don't even feel the need to break traffic laws. Unlike couriers in other cities, the Boulder crew patiently waits for the light to turn green, as do the majority of other bikers on the road. GOBoulder's latest education campaign is called "courtesy is contagious," and it encourages people using all forms of transportation to be considerate to each other and obey traffic laws.

One rider who also preaches the benefits of obeying the rules of the road is long time bike advocate Bill Doub, 79, one of the founding members of Boulder Bicycle Commuters and an agitator for bike improvements in the city since 1974. The groups members are usually the first ones to say that Boulder isn't perfect.

"Boulder is ahead of the country in two areas," says Doub, "Bicycles and Hipocrisy. They ride their bikes to the hills and back, then they get in their SUV to go down to the store for a loaf of bread."

Riding around town on a bicycle sporting an anarchist flag and a big yellow sign that says "Bicycling. A quiet statement against oil wars." Bill Doub points out street after street of bike lanes, saying, "we fought for that for years" and whenever the result was questionable, "the city came up with that."

If the city ever needed a push towards a bike-friendly future, this groups 100 or so members were shoving, says Doub. Their lists of complaints about streets, intersections and laws have often been absorbed directly into Boulder's Transportation Master Plan. 2004 was the first year their requests were not included wholesale into the plan, perhaps a sign that the city can now take off it's training wheels and create bike conscious roads on it's own.

Often passing by pedestrians and cyclists along his Broadway route from CU Boulder to City Hall, is Mayor Will Toor on a well-worn hybrid bike. He and former city council member Spenser Havelick

have just published a book titled "Transportation and Sustainable Campus Communities."

Toor's favorite accomplishment has to do with his own influence in changing the way the state allocates transportation funds. Now, instead of relying on political pressure to decide who gets what, the monies are distributed rationally, based on usage. Hence the more people bike, the more money the city puts towards biking infrastructure. And that money can go a long way.

"From a fiscal standpoint, investing in bicycle infrastructure is one of the most cost effective things that any city can do, Boston even more so than Boulder, because the density and the land costs there are higher. It's probably two orders of magnitude cheaper to shift somebody into a bicycle than to provide the infrastructure for an additional car." Says Toor.

Tim Blumenthal, of the national industry-supported bike advocacy group Bikes Belong, hopes that funding will get even better in the future. Bikes Belong derives its funding directly from the profits of the bicycle industry, and gives most of it to a lobbying coalition called America Bikes. Right now they are pushing for a 1% increase in Bicycle mode spending in the federal transportation bill TA-21. This could triple bike funding to \$6 billion over six years. Until three months ago, Bikes Belong was located in Boston. But even they had to give in and go where they have great bike paths right outside their window.

Boston would also be eligible for a share of this money, but the city would have to have bicycle projects to fund. Most off street paths are actually owned and maintained by the state and many of the projects that have begun have become mired in red-tape or a lack of city matched funds.

It isn't just the small cities that are addressing bike safety. London, Chicago, and New York City also have programs. New York won an honorable mention from the same LAB that awarded Boulder the Gold Medal.

Greulich used to tell people back home in Boston how great it is in Boulder, but now he says he doesn't bother.

"There's a reason for Boston and places like Los Angeles, and that's so people like us can move here. Now I tell them yeah it snows here all the time, it really sucks and you're probably better off where you are. Go Red Sox!"  
See also:

## REFERENCED LINKS

<http://www.ci.boulder.co.us/goboulder/>

<http://bikesbelong.org/site/intro.cfm>