

# “Should Cyclists Pay A Road Tax?” Analysis of the Open Campaign

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In July, Webtrends launched a marketing and community awareness campaign that posed the question “Should cyclists pay a road tax?” News of the ad stirred significant online debate about the topic and about Webtrends’ motivation for running the ad.



This paper details our findings from the campaign so far, and suggests ways the community could proceed.

In summary, more than half (55.3 percent) of those who answered the question came down against the idea of cyclists paying a road tax. The primary rationale was that most people who cycle also own cars and pay taxes. Among those in favor of cyclists paying a road tax, many cited the cost of bike-only infrastructure.

However, more than half the conversation did not answer the question posed on the train. The biggest non-answer was that our question was biased (21 percent). Insults directed at Webtrends accounted for 9 percent of the comments.

The other conversations revolved around topics that tend to dominate any bike-related discussions.

- **Bikes operate unsafely (13 percent)**
- **Cyclists should be insured and their bike registered (11 percent)**
- **This conversation will incite road rage (7 percent)**
- **Cars operate unsafely (4 percent)**

Based on the information gathered there are perceptions that the community should address, including:

- 1. Education about road funding**
- 2. Benefits of cycling for all road users**
- 3. Accountability for cyclists**

We originally planned to create another Max ad. We feel the limited space and transitory nature of a Max ad is better suited to raising issues. Addressing these and other perceptions will require a robust forum, where both sides can work together. Another Max ad would only isolate the sides more.

### **THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF THE BIKING BOOM**

Across North America, cities are seeing an increase in bike riding. This trend has many positive implications, however, the addition of bikes to already-congested roads has spurred debate among citizens and lawmakers about how motorists and cyclists can successfully coexist.

Bike registration and licensing have been hot topics in Oregon, with the “Share the Road, Share the Load” House Bill 3008 which died in the Oregon legislature earlier this year.

Webtrends joined the discussion when it ran an ad on the side of a Trimet Max train this past summer asking the question, “Should Cyclists Pay a Road Tax?” The ad was part of our ongoing community outreach, as well as a broader, ongoing marketing effort, called the Open Campaign by openly sharing the results of our own marketing campaign.

### **MEASURING PERCEPTION ABOUT A CYCLISTS AND TAXES**

Our goal was to demonstrate how Webtrends can help organizations understand public interest and sentiment. We chose a topic important to the Portland community and asked an admittedly provocative question.

Our goal was to highlight our online tracking and measurement capabilities measure and analyze the content and sentiment of the resulting online conversation.

In other words, we try to understand what people say and how they feel about the topic. This measurement can be helpful for businesses and organizations who are exploring new ideas, and who want to find out how they will be received, unearth misconceptions, and identify influencers.

Measuring sentiment and opinion is not a new science — public relations firms and politicians have used it for decades through opinion polls and surveys. We apply similar fundamentals and modern tools to digital conversations.

Webtrends has long been an active member of the Portland community. We are a worldwide company that has been headquartered in downtown Portland since 1993.

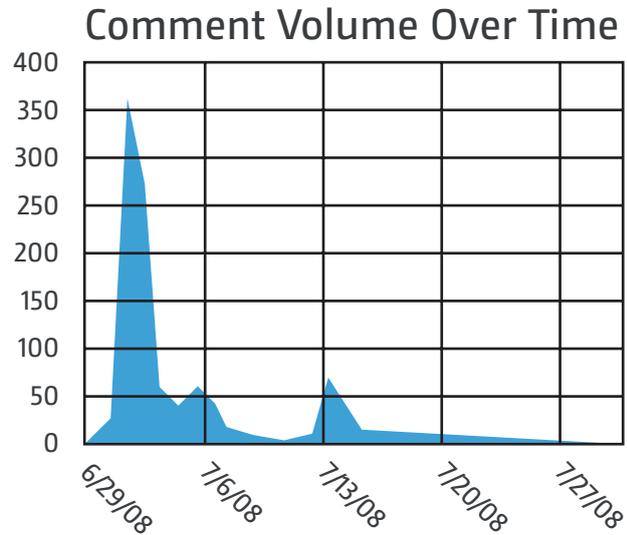
In addition to providing data for the Open Campaign, we genuinely hoped the ad would help increase awareness and debate about an important community topic.

### **A LOUD, HEATED DISCUSSION**

To say we stirred an already heated discussion would be an understatement. Today, our goal is to share the information we gathered, and present our insight as if our client was the Bicycle Transportation Alliance, Oregon Department of Transportation, the City of Portland Transportation Department or some other interested party.

### HOW THE CAMPAIGN PLAYED OUT

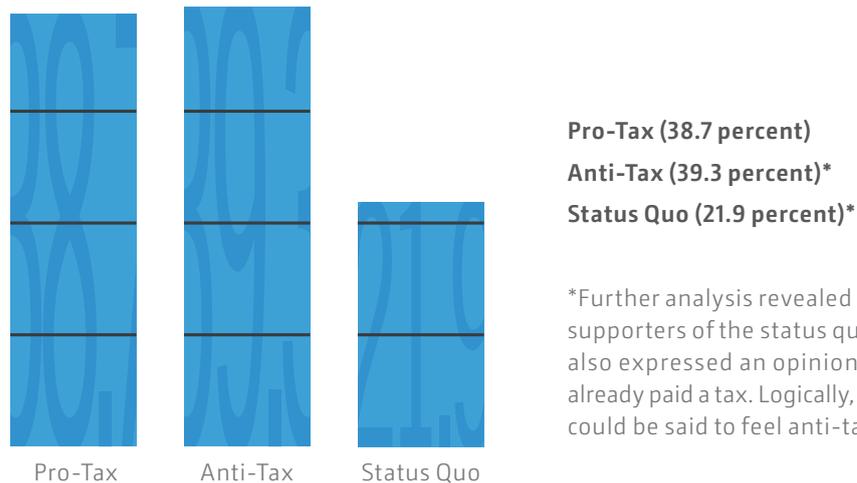
The campaign began June 30 when Webtrends sent a press release and landing page describing the ad and our plans. The same day, BikePortland.org picked up the story with an editorial lambasting the question. The story was picked up on KATU and OregonLive, as well as a few smaller sites. More than two-thirds (68 percent) of the conversation occurred before the ad first appeared on the Max train on July 3.



Two weeks later, when we released the initial dataset and analysis, the conversation picked back up briefly, primarily in response to coverage on OregonLive.

### MORE THAN HALF AGAINST A “ROAD TAX”

Of the 946 comments on the topic, 53 percent answered the question: “Should cyclists pay a road tax?” We split the sentiment into three basic categories:



@roadtax i have already paid my taxes as a car/property owner. if there's proportional funding for bike infrastructure you can tax my bike.

@danrasay  
(on Twitter)

Society is full of things I pay for but don't use. It's called a society. Taxes pay for it.

evilisafoot  
(on oregonlive.com)



Tax bicycles...Those green boxes do not paint themselves. If a city invests in a comprehensive bicycle commuter network, cyclists should be expected to pay a modest user fee.

KevinMichael  
(on oregonlive.com)

What 'free gift' are you referring to? The cyclist who rode in the left lane of MLK for 2 fricking miles during rush hour just so she could make a left turn on Burnside? Or the guy who popped off the sidewalk, swerved into the street and caused traffic to slam to a stop? All while wearing an ipod in both ears and oblivious to the real world?

Zer0  
(on KATU.com)

### TOP ANTI-TAX RATIONALE: "WE ALREADY PAY FOR ROADS"

Two-thirds (67 percent) of those who were anti-tax indicated that they already pay for roads through general taxes and/or taxes they pay for their cars. The latter assertion is important because many people don't understand that fuel taxes and car registration fees provide only a portion of road funding. (The section titled: "A Valid Question?" will further explore this issue.) Anti-tax respondents contended:



- 67% — I already pay taxes that fund roads.
- 19% — Bikes damage roads less.
- 14% — Bikes reduce traffic congestion.

### PRO-TAX RATIONALE: BIKE-ONLY INFRASTRUCTURE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Less than half (44 percent) of those who were pro-tax cited a rationale along the lines of, "The bike-only infrastructure only benefits people who cycle, so people who cycle should pay for it."

Other pro-tax rationale and opinions addressed accountability:

- 27 percent felt cyclists should be required to register and/or carry liability insurance.
- 22 percent expressed frustration about cyclists riding unsafely.

### A VALID QUESTION? DO CYCLISTS ALREADY PAY TAXES?

The largest thread of conversation (16 percent of the total) was criticism that our question was framed in a biased way. The conversation suggests "Should cyclists pay a road tax?" perpetuated a myth that cyclists do not already help pay for road construction and maintenance. This criticism is worth exploring.

Road funding is complex. Scott Bricker from the Bicycle Transportation Alliance jokes that there are likely fewer than 20 people in the state who really understand how road funding works.

Funding, fees and taxes vary from city to city, county to county. For example, the [Portland transportation budget](#) includes its portion of the state gas tax, car registration fees, general tax funds, interagency contracts and grants from the state and federal government. The State of Oregon's [road funding and revenue resources](#) are equally complex.

In addition, [89 percent of cyclists also own cars](#) (according to a 2009 Bicycle Transportation Alliance survey) and nearly 100 percent are tax-paying citizens.

Many anti-tax commenters noted that the cycling infrastructure benefits ALL road users, not merely cyclists.

- **Bike lanes let cars pass cyclists without slowing down.**
- **Green painted bike boxes prevent fatal accidents.**
- **Sharrows, bike boulevards and bike paths separate road users.**
- **Every cyclist is one less car creating traffic congestion.**
- **Bikes do less damage to roads and paths, requiring less maintenance.**

The main reason cited by pro-tax commenters was exactly the opposite: that cycling infrastructure benefits ONLY cyclists.

These conflicting perceptions suggest that the question is valid, even if it was an unpopular one in the cycling community.

### **UNSAFE RIDING: ANOTHER MAJOR THREAD OF CONVERSATION**

About 10 percent of all comments centered around unsafe behavior from cyclists. More than 21 percent of people mentioned some combination of liability insurance and identifiable bike registration related to unsafe riding. Even a small number (3.5 percent) of anti-tax comments mentioned unsafe riding as a problem. (See “Accountability for Cyclists” under “Three Major Opportunities” below.)

### **RECOMMENDATIONS: THREE MAJOR OPPORTUNITIES**

Based on this conversation, we have identified three topics interested parties should address:

#### **1. Education about Road Funding**

Our data uncovered a major roadblock that must be addressed: Most people have no idea how roads are funded.

But that’s not a huge surprise. Road funding is, to be generous, a byzantine and boring subject. Overlapping jurisdictions, separate agencies and myriad funding sources make it nearly impossible to say who pays for what. One opportunity would be to help all road users understand how roads are funded.

The amount of misinformation shared throughout this campaign was staggering. Yet, however difficult it is to categorize sentiment based on bad information, it’s critical. It is impossible to change minds if you don’t clear up misinformation and provide new information to replace it.

#### **2. The Benefits of Increased Bike Infrastructure**

A number of traffic studies have shown that reducing just a small percentage of cars from the road can reduce congestion. Making bike routes safer would appear to help protect cyclists and may encourage more drivers to ride bikes.

As a result, increased funding for cycling-only infrastructure such as lane striping, Portland’s green bike boxes, painting of shared bike/car traffic arrows or “sharrows, signage, etc. would appear to benefit both bikers and motorists.

The bad behavior on roads by bikers and drivers... is covered by traffic tickets. These should be enforced. Tax as punishment doesn't make much sense.

**MB425**  
(on oregonlive.com)



“hey webtrends. analyze this.... you suck.”

**the future**  
(on bikeportland.org)

“This was not an attack on the bicycling community - this is a marketing scheme; there's really no reason to get ridiculously defensive about it. Let's use this for our betterment.”

**miracle\_minnie**  
(on bikeportland.org)

None of us is as dumb as all of us.

**jesse\_pdx**  
(on KATU.com)

Additional study is necessary to determine the impact of current bike infrastructure on safety. In addition, there appears to be an opportunity for a campaign that publicizes the benefits of bike infrastructure for motorists.

However, based on the findings of our campaign, it seems necessary to explain these shared benefits to those who believe cyclists should pay for cycling-only infrastructure.

### 3. Accountability for Cyclists

Though not initially one of our intended topics, this campaign measured the perception that some cyclists ride dangerously. Is it true? We can't measure truth; we measure perception. And those who commented were not inclined to side with cyclists because they feel frustrated by the dangerous riding.

If these perceptions are deemed to have statistical merit, there may be a need to increase bike safety training within communities or schools. If not deemed valid, concerned groups may want to educate motorists about this reality.

### CONCLUSION

The primary conflict among commenters came down to this: Does cycling infrastructure benefit only cyclists, or all road users? And thus, who should pay for it?

We originally planned to create another Max ad but the sides are too polarized and the topic is too complex for a Max ad to help advance the discussion or adequately educate people on both sides. The limited space and transitory nature of Max ads are more suited to raising issues, not to resolving them.

However, we still believe that there is a way to discuss these issues. In addition to the cost of the Max ad we invested a few hundred hours into this campaign and this document, and we hope that this research will help interested parties work to resolve these important issues.

### About Webtrends Inc.

Webtrends is an enterprise customer intelligence company that turns online and offline data into understanding. Webtrends delivers the industry's most recognized search engine marketing, visitor intelligence, and analytics solutions to enable companies to understand their customers, drive engagement, and enhance marketing and brand awareness. Thousands of global organizations, including Microsoft, Reuters, General Mills and Ticketmaster have chosen Webtrends business solutions and client services expertise to optimize their customers' online experiences. You can learn more about Webtrends products and services at <http://www.Webtrends.com/> or call 1.877.932.8736.