

# **Baltimore cyclists at City Hall applaud bills, tell horror stories . . . and search for bike racks?**

by Fern Shen, *Baltimore Brew*, May 8, 2010

Baltimore bicyclists packed City Council chambers Thursday afternoon to support five pending bills designed to make Baltimore friendlier toward bikes . . . and to tell them some grim anecdotes to illustrate why city cyclists need such help.

“A couple of drivers were yelling and so angry at me — they were threatening to get out of their car and physically push me off the road,” said Rachel Wilkinson, who said when this happened she was riding her bike on a presumably safe stretch of 33rd Street, a place where there was a “sharrow,” one of those cyclist silhouettes on the road surface.

“They were screaming and hollering and pulling their car up, as if to hit me,” Wilkinson said, outside the hearing. “It was terrifying. If I hadn’t been a woman, I think, they would have beaten me up.”

The hearing itself was a good illustration of how far Baltimore has to go before it is a bike-y city: there were so few bike racks outside City Hall that bikes were locked to park benches and outdoor stairway handrails.

Thursday’s meeting of the Community Development Subcommittee was chaired by Council member William H. Cole IV and prominently featured the bills’ chief sponsor, council member Mary Pat Clarke.

The bills are:

- **Bike-safe Grates** (09-0431) – This would require that any street projects involving new drainage grates use bike-safe grates, ie., the kind with openings set at an angle so bike tires won’t get stuck in them.
- **Bike Lanes** (09-0430) – This would standardize the lane size and surface markings and signage for bike lanes and establish a \$50 fine for parking in a bike lane.
- **Parking for Bicycles**(09-0429) – This requires bike racks in new developments and allows developers to reduce the vehicle parking spaces in return for installing bike spaces.
- **Police Issues** (09-0175R)- A resolution calling on city police to work with the council to improve relations with the cycling community, including encouraging them to file reports on bicycle-involved crashes.
- **Complete Streets** (09-0433)- A resolution calling for the city to adopt a nationally recognized set of principles for urban planners known as “complete streets,” which means designing for pedestrians, public transportation and bicyclists, as well as cars.

Clarke said she was glad to see a big turnout from the bike community; they have collected more than 1,000 signatures in support of the bills. Bicycle advocates have made

gains lately, with the passage of the three-foot bill in Annapolis during the past legislative session.

But Clarke was none too thrilled – and some cyclists’ jaws dropped – at the news that Segways and motor scooters might, under state law, have to be allowed to use the bike lanes. Clarke asked a representative from the city law department to try to draft language of the bike lane bill so that it does not explicitly allow Segways and scooters.

Jamie Kendrick, the city’s deputy transportation director, said encouraging bikes was part of his department evolving to be more “multi-modal” and cited their establishment of a new position for a “pedestrian and bicycle planner” (Nate Evans), their installation of 42 new bike racks around the city this year and progress on a bicycle sharing program.

### **Spokes-people spoke**

Bike advocates were generally eager to applaud the bills and convey to all how committed they are to a bike-powered lifestyle.

“I’ve lived here since 1994 and I commute to downtown every day, all year long, in every kind of weather,” said Joanne Stato, who estimated that her daily three-mile round trip commute saves her \$100/month in parking fees. “It’s good to get exercise. It’s wonderful for my state of mind.”

What Stato doesn’t like, she said, are the people who do not respect the bike lane at the Inner Harbor: “taxis, police and emergency vehicles, motorists and clueless people who park in the bike lane.”

She also complained about a weird situation *the Brew* flagged back in November: the weird bike *AND BUS* lane on Pratt Street. “I don’t know who ever thought of bicycles and buses sharing a lane,” Stato said, “but it’s crazy, it’s scary, it’s dangerous!”

Amanda Meyers said she moved to Baltimore 15 months ago from New York City and sees making the city safer and easier to bike in as an urgent need for Baltimore “if we have any hopes of attracting young professionals.”

“I have so many friends who have moved to the city and are on the fence about staying here and bike lanes and things like that are actually important to them,” she said.

### **Bike people being used?**

Perhaps the only person who came to the meeting with anything negative to say about the bills was Joan Floyd, of the Remington Neighborhood Alliance. Floyd buttonholed Clarke before the hearing and said the bike rack bill, 09-0429, “has big problems.”

The issue? Floyd was strongly opposed to the bill’s “offset” provision, the formula which would allow developers to reduce the number of vehicle parking spaces in exchange for bike rack spots.

“This bill looks like it was written by developers,” she said. “The bicycle people are being used.”

The issue never got aired out because, indeed — as Floyd said before the hearing, and Cole pointed out during the hearing — the bill essentially proposes a change in zoning law which means it must be advertised as such (it wasn't) and approved by the Planning Commission (it hasn't been. So it was yanked from consideration for the moment.