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San Jose's first Via Velo event brings out all manner of motor-free rolling fans

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For much of a sunny blue Saturday, a swath of downtown San Jose was all about the bike — and about the skateboard, the foot and other nonmotorized forms of transportation.

There were families on recumbent bikes tugging kids and dogs in trailers behind them; a group of Mormon missionaries in pressed white shirts riding bikes with bright green, blue and orange rims; and daily bike commuters proudly astride their dusty workhorses.

The latest government estimates say that just 1 percent of San Jose commuters use a bicycle to get to work, and a big chunk of that two-wheel population likely showed up Saturday for San Jose's inaugural ViaVelo event, where the city gave a one-mile stretch of downtown over to bikes for a day to promote a greener view of the future.

Cribbing off a global movement that began in Bogota, Colombia, bicycle advocates hope that the event — ViaVelo was the start of a series of bicycle-oriented events this week in San Jose including a stage of the Amgen Tour of California on Wednesday

— will boost awareness that the bicycle is critical to San Jose's future.

"It's the whole concept of opening up the city streets for people — not traffic," said Corinne Winter, executive director of the Silicon Valley Bicycle Coalition. "It sort of shows people that the street is not just about the car."

Free helmets

Michael Pulhamus, a 55-year-old part-time massage therapist with a ZZ Top-length gray beard, would certainly agree with that sentiment.

Pulhamus, whose other vehicle of choice is his Harley-Davidson, was taking advantage of the free bike-helmet giveaway that was part of the festival. He rode a bicycle with a U.S. flag mounted on the back and etched with the kind of Rubenesque woman that appears on some Harleys. He said he wished the government had done as much to promote bicycles and motorcycles back in the '50s as it did cars.

"It'd be a whole different place," he said, imagining a two-wheeled world of Harleys, Treks and Cannondales. "People could just kick back."

Other bicycle enthusiasts agreed that though San Jose could do much more to promote biking by adding things such as pressure sensors that would trigger traffic lights for bikes as well as cars, events such as ViaVelo are a good way to promote interest and to remind motorists that bikes have an equal right to the road.

It was unclear how many of those motorists were at ViaVelo, however. Only about 3,500 San Jose

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residents commute to work by bike each day, according to the latest U.S. Census Bureau estimates, a paltry share of commuters compared with the 2.5 percent of San Francisco commuters who bike and the 5 percent of commuters in Portland, Ore.

Bike city ahead

"This is very car-oriented at the moment," said Eloy Wouters, a San Jose physicist who grew up in Holland, one of the world's most bike-friendly countries. He pedals to work about eight miles every day along the Guadalupe River. Still, Wouters said bike lanes and trails like the Guadalupe River Trail show the city is aiming toward a more bike-friendly future, and "I think that events like this help people think about that and see that."

City officials are focused on increasing the 150 miles of San Jose streets with bike lanes to 500 miles, said Steven Brewster of the city's Office of Economic Development, which helped coordinate the event. And ViaVelo, sponsored in part by Mattson Technology, where CEO Dave Dutton is a regular bike commuter, was also a way for groups such as the Greenbelt Alliance to promote its vision of a more dense development pattern that would allow people to walk and bike more, and use cars less.

"We really want to have a city that is developed for people, and not just cars," said Michele Beasley of the alliance.

Bicyclists like Ian Emmons, who started biking to work at Cisco Systems from his home in Sunnyvale about three years ago and never went back to the car, said events such as ViaVelo show things are changing.

"I love the fact," Emmons said to someone standing beside him, "that San Jose is becoming a bike city."

Contact Mike Swift at 408-271-3648. Follow him on Twitter at [Twitter.com/swiftstories](https://twitter.com/swiftstories).

OTHER events

Saturday's ViaVelo event was the first of several bike-oriented events in San Jose this week:

Tuesday: "Get Back on Your Bike!" Cycling instruction presentation; noon-1 p.m., Martin Luther King Library, 150 E. San Fernando St.
Wednesday: SunPower King of the Mountain Ride and Webcor Builders Executive Challenge, 8 a.m., 3150 Sierra Road. The Amgen Tour of California, 11 a.m., Plaza de Cesar Chavez.

Thursday: Free screening of "Breaking Away," 6:30 p.m., Camera 12, 201 S. Second St.

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