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Opinion: Biking to work should be part of climate change solutions

Carl Guardino and Jim Wunderman
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When it comes to encouraging Bay Area residents to trade in four wheels for two, the past few weeks underscore Charles Dickens' opening lines in "A Tale of Two Cities": "It was the best of times. It was the worst of times."

We have just celebrated important public investments in new bike paths throughout Silicon Valley, including the Mary Avenue bridge over Highway 280. We also mourned the hit-and-run crash of a young woman cyclist in Saratoga.

But overall, bicycling as transportation, not just recreation, is growing. And it must continue to grow as part of the solution to climate change.

In California, 40 percent of our greenhouse gases are from our daily transportation decisions. In the Bay Area, it's 51 percent.

There are many ways to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, including building efficient mass transit systems like BART to Silicon Valley and encouraging the use of electric vehicles. But bicycling more is one of the simplest and most cost-effective things we can do.

Many men and women who can't wait to get on their bikes on the weekend don't realize they easily could have the same healthy experience on weekdays. Like so many healthy habits, getting started is the hard

part. That includes figuring out the best route, making the most of bike lanes and trails so that the trip is safe and efficient — or, if your commute is too long to ride all the way, deciding where to pick up a bus or train for part of the trip.

To push riders to give it a try, we sponsor an annual CEO/Celebrity Cycle-To-Work-Day Challenge, which this year is May 14, during national "Bike To Work Week." Our organizations, the Bay Area Council and the Silicon Valley Leadership Group, use this event to urge regional residents to park their cars and ride their bikes. And we pedal what we preach. Jim will trip-link, commuting as usual on BART and biking to and from the stations. Carl will continue his four-days-each-week routine of biking round-trip between Los Gatos and San Jose.

While climate change is a big part of our motivation — both groups are heavily committed to reducing energy use and the region's carbon footprint — traffic congestion is part of it, too. The annual Bay Area Poll ranks congestion as the top concern nearly every year. But four of 10 Bay Area commutes are five miles or less, an easy bike ride, and three of 10 people who bike to work a few times continue on an ongoing basis.

The region's health is also a major factor. Obesity is epidemic, with four in 10 adults overweight or obese. Equally alarming, childhood obesity affects one of every four kids, and parents' example makes a difference. Simply stated, biking burns carbs, not carbon.

Leadership is often a key to changing people's habits, which is why we ask CEOs and some other local celebrities to join us in the Cycle-To-Work-Day Challenge. Already, 60 CEOs and elected leaders with 100,000 regional employees have taken our three-part pledge: Personally ride to work May 14,

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encourage their employees to ride and host a "Celebration Station" to reward participation.

The Highway 9 tragedy reminds us to think safety first. Before your first bicycle commute, determine a safe route and test it on the weekend. But take this opportunity to give it a try, whether your motivation is the stress of our congested roads, your own health, the health of your kids or the health of our planet.

Jim Wunderman is CEO of the Bay Area Council (BAC.org), and Carl Guardino is CEO of the Silicon Valley Leadership Group (SVLG.net). They wrote this article for the Mercury News.

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