



DERRICK Z. JACKSON

Wheel dividends

Take a cue from Europe on breaking car dependence

Bremen, Germany

THE SELF-congratulations by bailed-out American car companies are hard to take seriously in a continent of relatively Lilliputian cars, amazing trains, and almost perfect public transit.

Chrysler last week claimed it may break even this year. General Motors boasted of repaying billions in government loans. GM CEO Ed Whitacre said, "I think the government and us, the taxpayers, made a terrific investment, and I think it's going to pay off big time."

The payoff is not yet visible. GM promises the electric Volt, but it currently has only one car, the Malibu, among 52 wagons, sedans, and small cars cited by Consumer Reports for high fuel efficiency. Chrysler has none. Both companies still dominate the ratings for worst fuel efficiency from subcompacts to SUVs. Ford, which did not take a bailout, remains the only Detroit competitor in fuel efficient vehicles with its Ford Fusion hybrid. Fittingly, Ford is expecting a \$1 billion first-quarter profit.

While America spends \$82 billion hoping bankrupt companies retool for President Obama's 35-mile-per-gallon standards by 2016, other countries are

already into high gear getting cars off the street completely.

In two-and-a-half weeks in Stockholm,

Copenhagen, and Bremen, I did not witness a single downtown traffic jam. Part of that is due to the cost of gasoline, up to \$8 a gallon. But it is also the alternatives. In Stockholm, buses were frequent and comfortable. Subways in Stockholm and Copenhagen were so smooth and quiet, they made our Boston T seem like a rattletrap. Bus service is so dreadful in many US cities that only the poor climb aboard.

Not only are long-distance European trains blindingly fast, but my wife and I were flabbergasted when our Copenhagen-to-Hamburg express slowed down to enter what we thought was a tunnel. Then everyone was told to get out and go up on deck. The train had been loaded onto a ferry for a 45-minute sea crossing.

The most memorable sight was the most simple: The bicycle. During weekday rush hours, hundreds of people pedal in business attire or with backpacks, groceries, and construction-job tools. Obese people were hardly in sight.

In Copenhagen, at the end of a conference dinner, a middle-age woman rose up at 10:30 p.m. to bid adieu and said she was riding her bike home. At the end of a gathering in Bremen at midnight, a man in his 20s said he was riding his bike the half-hour home. The 65-year-old mother of our hosts in Bremen rides her bike from her house a third of a mile away to see her three grandchildren. Children on cycles are everywhere.

This is no accident. Copenhagen was car-clogged a half century ago, shocked into a fresh vision by the 1970s energy crisis and recession. Urban planners in Copenhagen have installed more than 200 miles of bicycle lanes. Stockholm says it has built more than 460 miles. In these cities, as well as Bremen, bike lanes either share large, wide sidewalks with pedestrians or are separate, dedicated tracks adjacent to sidewalks. Today, the city of Copenhagen says 37 percent of work and school commutes are done by bike. Stockholm says 150,000 of its 810,000 residents bike regularly to work.

This is unlike Boston and Cambridge, where lanes are painted on streets almost as a dare, sandwiching cyclists in between traffic on the left and parked cars on the right, where doors can swing open at any moment. Only the most nimble or fearless of cyclists use them at rush hour. The lanes are a largely vacant symbol of why less than 1 percent of commutes in the United States are done by bike, according to the Census.

That is why the latest auto news is so dull. Instead of throwing billions at uninspired car companies, cities should be reconstructed so that you will want to leave the car in the garage. The real headline is when grandma feels safe to pedal down the street to see her grandkids.

Derrick Z. Jackson can be reached at jackson@globe.com.

