

No, Chain Reaction did not "declare ourselves essential" today. But maybe indirectly we kinda sorta did? It's complicated.

Today, I was referenced by the bicycle industry's trade publication, BRAIN (Bicycle Retailer & Industry News) as being one of a handful of bicycle businesses that had "declared" itself "essential" and chose to remain open despite regulations that said we should be closed. There was no defiant "declaration" involved; we chose to remain open today (Tuesday, March 17th, the first day of the mandatory shelter-at-home mandate) partly because the wording in the FAQ allowed businesses essential to transportation needs to remain open, and partly because a sudden "hard" close would have placed great hardship on customers picking up bikes they had dropped off for repair or special orders etc. So we opened for business, but let everyone know who called that we could be closing on a moment's notice. As of 6:35pm, in Santa Clara County, bicycle repair shops have been added to the list of "essential" transportation businesses allowed to stay open. We expect San Mateo County, and others, to follow shortly.

In the meantime, below is my response to the BRAIN article, which can be read here-

<https://www.bicycleretailer.com/retail-news/2020/03/17/some-bay-area-stores-declare-themselves-essential-and-remain-open-despit-e#.XnG946hKiPo>

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Just to be clear, we (Chain Reaction Bicycles) did not "declare" ourselves to be "essential." What we have done is to ask that we share the same status as others providing support for the transportation infrastructure, specifically auto parts supply stores and auto repair businesses.

Many of us have spent years, decades even, lobbying for cycling infrastructure in our communities to allow the safe and convenient use of bicycles for transportation, not just recreational activities. And it's happened. Bicycles, especially in dense urban environments, are seeing increased use. Not entirely from the activities of advocates but also organically, as increased congestion has made car use increasingly difficult.

And in this crisis, there is simply no safer, less-likely-to-encounter-COVID19 means of travel, than by bike. You're not sharing recirculated air with anyone else. By nature it's difficult to be closer than 6ft from someone. It doesn't require refueling using metal & plastic nozzles and touch points that are known to carry the virus for multiple days.

But in the end, I'm tasked with the question I apply to as many choices as I can. Which decision I make will make the world a tiny bit better place, and which might make it a tiny bit worse?

When I think about those in our local community who depend upon us for things as simple as a flat tire or as complicated as changing out the gears to make the bike more practical for a rider's level of fitness, when I think about the increasing number of my customers who have to ride a bike because they can't afford any other way to travel, when I think about my employees who see the bicycle as a solution to so many different problems... that seems like we're doing our part to make the world a better place by staying open and helping those people.

The argument for being closed? What makes my business more special than so many that are forced closed? What if, despite our best efforts, we become part of the problem because we can't screen who comes through the door, we can't clean as fast as one person, then another, might touch something? What if I can't separate my own desire to feel relevant (after 40 years, who could?) from the greater need to control the virus?

I have more questions than answers. But I did not feel like I was breaking any new ground, asking for something not intended by the stay-at-home mandate, by seeing the bicycle business as a parallel to the automotive business, in terms of serving transportation needs. We (many of us in the cycling industry) have been pounding home the point of bicycles as transportation for ages, as I previously pointed out. So part of this is that very strange feeling that hey, we've arrived, we are part of the solution, why are we being seen as part of the problem.

One thing is certain; no matter what choice is made, it will be easy for some to see it as the wrong choice. We have found yet

another way to polarize people. Missing is that feeling that everyone is sacrificing together for the greater good. It doesn't feel like you can get there from here.

Mike Jacobowsky, Partner, Chain Reaction Bicycles