

BEST PRACTICES

Best Practices
by Mark Tomb



Encouraging the Use of Bikes...

As gas prices have now topped the \$4 mark in many places, urban areas are compelled to think creatively about transportation issues. For most of the last century, getting people to where they want to go has largely been about building better roads that have been designed solely for automobiles. While many of us still see bicycles as purely recreational, an increasing number of individuals nationwide are using bikes for commuting to work.

There are a number of strategies that cities can follow to encourage more residents to occasionally park their cars and ride their bikes. These strategies center around locality, policies, and routes. These strategies also have the effect of increasing a community's quality of life by providing additional recreational opportunities and by reducing our overall impact on the environment.

Locality

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, Americans have an average commute time of 24.3 minutes from their front door to their place of employment. In Kansas, the average commute time is 17.5 minutes, which is among the shortest nationwide. While it might seem short and doable, if you add it all up, we are, on average, spending more time in our cars heading to work than on vacation each year.

Many employees choose to live further away from work because there is a lack of viable housing options. Other factors such as changing job opportunities, the quality of schools, and other quality-of-life concerns cause people to live in one city while working in another.

For biking and walking to become practical commuting options, the distance has to be shortened by either increasing viable housing stock in areas close to where people are currently employed or by increasing the job opportunities in and around where people currently live. In either case, local government has a role through economic development, infrastructure improvements, and service delivery.

Policies

Many people live close enough to their place of employment to either walk or bike on a regular basis, but they simply choose not to. Creating incentives and improving infrastructure are ways to bring about change in any organization. Changes could include:

- Installation of bicycle racks or secure parking areas;
- Conveniently located showers and lockers;
- Increased parking fees to serve as a financial incentive not to drive;
- Develop an official position of the organization to not only encourage city employees to ride bikes but also serve as a model within the community;
- Tying healthcare costs to behavioral choices. This could include rewarding bicyclists with lower rates or lower deductibles in ways similar to what has been extended to non-smokers in several locations; and
- Hold a monthly drawing for prizes given to people who regularly bicycle or walk to work.

Routes

Designated bike lanes obviously have additional costs associated with them, but they also dramatically increase public safety of commuters and youth bikers. The cost of lanes depends on whether the road has enough space to simply stripe the section to be used for bikes or if additional road is needed to be constructed to satisfy space and safety concerns.

Obviously, bicycle routes need to get people to where they want to go safely and efficiently. While not all roads need to be bicycle friendly, a big-picture approach to planning these routes needs to be utilized. One such effort is to develop a bicycle master plan as part of your city's transportation-planning process. Across the country, bicycle planning efforts are also being done regionally as well as on a statewide basis.

Examples of local, regional, and statewide route-planning efforts can be found at the website of the Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center (www.bicyclinginfo.org). This organization is a national clearinghouse for information about health and safety, engineering, advocacy, education, enforcement, access, and mobility for pedestrians (including transit users) and bicyclists.

Becoming a Bicycle-Friendly Community


The Bicycle-Friendly Communities Campaign is an awards program that recognizes municipalities that actively support bicycling. A Bicycle-Friendly Community provides safe accommodation for cycling and encourages its residents to bike for transportation and recreation.

Communities interested in the program must submit an application. A committee then reviews and scores the application and consults with local cyclists in your community. An award of platinum, gold, silver, or bronze status is designated for four years. In Kansas, two communities are current award winners. Both Lawrence and Shawnee have been designated as bronze-level members for their efforts.

Lawrence is among the Midwest leaders in bicycle use. In fact, 1.3% of Lawrence's population regularly bikes to work. While this may not sound remarkably high, it is three times the national average. The city does not just encourage bicycle commuting, it also features numerous routes for commuting and recreation, a highly advertised "share the road" campaign to encourage awareness of bicyclists, and the City has upgraded bicycle parking facilities in downtown Lawrence.

Shawnee was the first city in the Kansas City metro area to draft and adopt a bicycle transportation plan that addresses both on-road and off-road bicycle facilities. The City has made considerable investments in connecting residential areas to each other as well as to recreational trails and parks.

More information on the Bicycle-Friendly Communities Campaign can be found at www.bicyclefriendlycommunity.org.

 Mark Tomb is the Intergovernmental Relations Associate for the League of Kansas Municipalities. He can be reached at mtomb@lkm.org or (785) 354-9565.