

Pittsburgh becomes increasingly bike friendly

By Bob Karlovits
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Pittsburgh is becoming a bicycle town.

It is a city where trolley tracks and Belgian brick-lined streets are nightmares of the past.

Now, it is a city with about 22 miles of bike trails and 14 miles of marked bike lanes with plans for more, says city bicycling-pedestrian coordinator Stephen Patchan.

It is a city with a pub and a coffee shop heavily into the bike culture.

Good magazine, a health and activity publication from Los Angeles, lists Pittsburgh as one of its seven top cities with a burgeoning bike scene.

"We are on the map," says Brad Quartuccio, co-publisher of the Bloomfield-based magazine Urban Velo.

"Bicycling is growing by leaps and bounds," says Tom Baxter, executive director of Friends of the Riverfront, a development and recreation group.

Business has increased 20 percent to 30 percent at the three shops of Pittsburgh Pro Bikes, says Todd Schoeni, who owns the chain with Craig Cozza.

Golden Triangle Bike Rental added another site only a little more than 3 miles away from its original.

"It seems like we have something special going on here," its owner, Tom Demagall, says of the interest in riding.

MORE PRESSURE IN THE TIRES

Numbers tell the story, but they can be hard to find.

The city's Patchan and Scott Bricker, executive director of BikePGH, the bicycling advocacy group, say they are working to develop estimates of the numbers of riders but have no figures right now.

"You can monitor one intersection one year to the next, and it just gets bigger and bigger," Bricker says.

Seth Grnot, bike tour coordinator with outside advocacy group Venture Outdoors, expects more than 400 people to take part in the group's cycling programs this year, as opposed to 36 in 2006.

The group even held a Beyond Bikes Day in East Liberty to take bicycling instruction to inner-city children.

Bike rental dealer Demagall, owner of Golden Triangle Bike Rental at the end of the Eliza Furnace Trail, Downtown, added a site at the SouthSide Works this year because business has risen steadily.

He says ridership doubled from 2007 to '08, and this year, "we've had some weekends in April that were as busy as my top days last summer."

TIME TO CELEBRATE

This city will be joining New York, London, Paris and Tokyo July 2 through 4 as the host of the Bicycle Film Festival.

Urban Velo, published by Quartuccio and Jeff Guerrero, and BikePGH are sponsoring the world-touring collection of films that will be screened at the Andy Warhol Museum in the North Side.

The event also will include a bicycle-roller competition at Over the Bar Bicycle Cafe on East Carson Street and the nearby Southside Brew House.

"Wherever we go, we find that advocacy groups are looking at Pittsburgh as a bicycle city on the way up," Quartuccio says. "It is a city with an older infrastructure, yet bicycling is growing, so everybody is watching it."

Schedules for the film festival are at bicyclefilmfestival.com.

GOING FOR THE BRONZE — OR BETTER

The League of American Bicyclists, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group, will name Philadelphia the state's first bicycle-friendly city July 4.

Pittsburgh doesn't have to be far behind.

Andy Clarke, president of the group, says it chooses cities by looking at five important E's: engineering, enforcement, education, evaluation and encouragement.

Working on "two or three" of these items is enough to get the bronze certification, which is what Philadelphia will receive.

Bike coordinator Patchan says he is aware of the certification, and says getting one for the city "is one of his goals."

HITTING THE TRAILS

Where there are roads, there are bike routes.

That seems like a simple statement, but it can be overlooked. BikePGH executive director Bricker is quick to point out that bicycling "gives you practically the same flexibility that you have when you are walking. You don't need a big street or any special kind of road. If there is a space there, you can

go."

But the variety of bike trails in the area has continued to boost bicycling.

"You cannot overstate the importance of trails to the growth of cycling," Patchan says.

Right now, 22 miles of trails up and down the Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio rivers create virtually traffic-free routes.

Friends of the Riverfront's Baxter talks about how planning has begun to extend the trail on the north side of the Allegheny as far as Armstrong County, "where it could meet a trail that would go to Erie."

Linda McKenna Boxx is executive director of the Allegheny Trail Alliance, the group that has overseen construction and maintenance of the Great Allegheny Passage. That is the trail that, when a connection to McKeesport is completed, will link Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C., by a car-free route.

She says trails make bicycling "accessible to everyone." As people ride more, bicycling becomes more "recognized and accepted."

She estimates between 500,000 and 700,000 riders used the Passage in 2008. That makes bicycling more common for every type of person.

"Have we reached the tipping point yet?" she says. "I don't know, but it's always growing."

DON'T GET LOST

BikePGH and the Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission are trying to make this more than the land of the lost.

BikePGH has produced a city-oriented map of bike routes that indicates hills, trailheads and several types of roads. It also offers evaluations of many of the area's bridges, illustrations of riding and safety hints.

The map can be viewed online at bike-pgh.org. A large water-resistant copy is available at bike shops and can be ordered for \$10 from the advocacy group at 33 Terminal Way, Pittsburgh, PA 15219.

The commission, a group meant to prioritize and strategize use of transportation funding in the 10-county area, has countywide maps showing possible routes for Allegheny and Greene counties.

Sara Walfoort, transportation planning manager, says the organization is working on an Indiana county map. It hopes to have the 10 counties done "in a year or so."

Those maps are less detailed but rate roads for good riding or those to avoid.

GETTING ON THE ROAD

Two major bicycling clubs are growing in their tasks.

Fred Klehm, president of the Western Pennsylvania Wheelmen, has taken on the need to help riders improve with weekly developmental rides out of North Park.

Scott Bricker has led BikePGH into all sorts of non-fuel advocacy. Besides maintaining a calendar of rides on the group's Web site, he has worked with the Port Authority Transit system in bus-bike commuting projects and has sponsored bike-to-work events.

The transit system has bike racks on buses on 12 routes and allows them on the T Line and the Monongahela incline. Jim Ritchie, a spokesman for the authority, says that amounts to 550 of 861 buses, adding that the goal is to have them on all buses. Schedules for rack-equipped buses and a map of the routes is available by going to the Port Authority site at portauthority.org then calling up the Rack 'n Roll information under the Customer Info heading.

Bricker says Pittsburgh is showing off its new life in having residents ride.

"When the G-20 comes here in September, people are going to be shocked about Pittsburgh," he says about the upcoming world economic summit. "I thought Pittsburgh was toxic,' they'll say."

He says his group has grown to almost 800 members since being founded in 2002.

Klehm sees a 10 percent growth, bringing his group to about 285 members. That has resulted in more rides and more challenging routes, to help riders develop.

"But we are going to have to get involved with BikePGH in more advocacy, too," he adds.

TAKE A BIKE AND TAKE A BREAK

Biking and eating go together well. Ask someone on a long ride.

It is only fitting when restaurants take on a bicycle theme or become places to support the sport.

OTB (Over the Bar) Bicycle Cafe, 2518 E. Carson St., South Side, is decorated in bikes and cycling gear -- some hanging right over the bar, which helps give the place its name.

At Tazza D'Oro, a coffee shop at 1125 N. Highland Ave., Highland Park, the dedication to cycling is shown by rides sponsored every Tuesday and Thursday evening.

Owner Amy Enrico calls cycling "something of a loose passion" and says a friend started the rides to try to lure her away from the workplace. That doesn't happen much -- work being work, and all -- but Enrico's dedication has kept the rides going.

It is common to see a cyclist taking a break on a ride in front of Tazza D'Oro, their bike resting nearby like horses at a hitching post.

CELEBRATE BIKING

When summer comes around, it is time to celebrate.

At least, that is the thinking of the folks at BikePGH, who for five years running have been sponsoring "a celebration of all things bicycle," as its founder, Scott Bricker, says.

This year's event will be from Aug. 14 through 23 and still is in the planning stages, but Bricker says it is easy to count on the variety of the past. Those activities have included parties, rides, races, classes and equipment exchanges.

For certain, he says, this year's BikeFest will include a beginning bicycling class for women.

You can stay in touch with the planning of this year's BikeFest on the bike-pgh.org Web site under the events heading. Right now, there is a brochure of the '08 event so you can get an idea of what to expect.

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