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U.S. Bicycle Route System In The Works

New Interstate Road Map Takes Shape For Bicyclists

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Two cyclists spin along a rural road in the Bitterroot Valley south of Missoula, Mont. (AP Photo/Adventure Cycling Assoc.)

(CBS) At first glance, everything seems out of place on the map of a new interstate road system taking shape across the nation.

Interstate 95 runs down the stunning sweep of the Pacific Coast, not the congested blandness of the Eastern Seaboard. Route 1 meanders along country roads, not strip malls. And you'll get your kicks on Route 76.

Mapmakers gone wild? Not quite.

State officials and bicycle enthusiasts are stitching together more than 50,000 miles of pedal-friendly pavement to form a vast network of bicycle routes connecting byways, cities and offroad trails in a system like the one created for cars and trucks over half a century ago.

The [American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials](#), working with the [Adventure Cycling Association](#) and other groups, recently approved a plan, four years in the making, that lays the foundation for the network. Now it's up to each state to create the routes and put up signs.

"It's a big turning point," said Jim Sayer, executive director of the Adventure Cycling group, the authority on transcontinental bike travel.

"We're coming down out of the clouds, having created the overall national plan, and getting to the nitty-gritty of creating interstate routes on the ground. It's a great opportunity for the U.S. to establish what could be the largest bicycle route network in the world."

The effort relies on cartography instead of construction, signposts instead of earth-movers.

Working from a bewildering tangle of existing roads, planners mapped a web of corridors where the national bicycle system should go. They considered traffic volume, terrain, amenities and ways to link together lightly traveled byways, secondary roads, urban trails and already established transcontinental bicycle routes.

Each corridor on the map they approved is a broad swath 50 miles wide; the precise routes within each corridor are still to be designated, numbered and given signs.

To avoid confusion, the proposed numbering system is reversed from interstate highways. For example, Route 10 is the southernmost east-west interstate for motor vehicles; bicycle Route 10 runs east-west close to the Canadian border.

Long-distance bicycling is catching the imagination - and in some cases, purse strings - of governments worldwide as they look for ways to encourage people-powered travel and tourism. If completed as planned, the U.S. network would outdistance anything offered in other countries, or even continents.

In Europe, a dozen long-distance routes are coming together in the 38,000-mile EuroVelo network, about one-third complete. For a route to qualify, it must have traffic volume under 1,000 vehicles a day, a grade no steeper than 6 percent and enough width for cyclists to ride two abreast.

In Quebec, the 2,700-mile Route Verte, or Greenway, was finished last year at a cost of more than \$80 million Canadian from the provincial government and millions more from localities along the way.

Quebec set rigorous conditions for operators who want business from the cyclists. For example, certified campgrounds must guarantee space to cyclists, reservation or not, and offer a sheltered place to eat. Participating hotels must offer high-carb meals, fresh fruit and secure storage for bikes. Amenities and public transportation are offered at set intervals.

The U.S. is a long way from that level of organization and is unlikely to adopt rigid nationwide standards for what constitutes a bike-friendly interstate route. The lay of the land is such that busier roads with wide shoulders are included along with quiet roads with no shoulders.

Adventure Cycling has thoroughly mapped 38,000 miles on its own. The new corridors incorporate many of those routes, perhaps most notably the [TransAmerica Trail](#), the mother road of transcontinental bicycling connecting Virginia and Oregon over 4,262 miles.

The interstate plan marks a revival of sorts for Route 76, the 1976 bicentennial bicycle route that shares most of the same roads with the TransAm. Virginia has already put up Bicycle Route 76 signs for the new system - signs that will rise again across the country if the vision of the planners is made real.