

Reprinted from: Connecticut Post/ctpost.com

Date: February 13, 2012

State's Complete Streets Act Produces More Bike-Friendly Roads; But Dangerous Streets Persist, Federal Funding In Jeopardy

By John Burgeson and Vinti Singh

NORWALK -- For [David Marcus](#), fatherhood is taking his daughter to day care on his bicycle. She sits on a special seat designed to fit on his handlebars, and leans forward when she spots a squirrel.

To get her there, he has to navigate from their home in South Norwalk to the edge of Merritt 7. The fastest way would be to take the flat, high-speed roads, but it would also be the most risky. Instead, he takes a network of back roads.

Marcus is a diehard biker. He will put up with small shoulders, scarce bike racks and taking the long way. But for the average rider, Connecticut's bike infrastructure is mostly nonexistent. The state has passed laws and pushed policy to improve biking conditions, but it's bicyclists like Marcus who are driving the change, one road at a time.

In 2009, former Gov. [M. Jodi Reil](#) signed the state's Complete Streets act into law. It immediately required all new or renovated roads in the state to be designed with all users -- including walkers and bicyclists -- in mind. The law also created a [Connecticut Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Board](#) tasked with reviewing the state's progress.

The board issued its 2011 annual report in January, and one of its recommendations was that local ordinances and regulations need to be updated to match the state's Complete Streets Law. Local roads should be included in the state's network of identified bike-friendly roads, according to the report.

"State roads are generally busier, with more, and faster motorized traffic. The fastest route between points is generally intimidating to bicyclists," according to the report.

This is especially true on most major suburban arteries, such as Trumbull's White Plains Road and Stamford's Long Ridge Road, with four lanes of traffic traveling at relatively high speeds, and scant room for cyclists.

Rude drivers

Roads aside, bike riders say that rude, uncaring and inattentive drivers are their biggest threats to safety.

"People aren't taught from the beginning to share the road with bikes," said [Chris Mandell](#), who runs the [Spoke & Wheel Bike Shop on Bridgeport's East Main Street](#). "It's nowhere on the driver's license test. Most licensed drivers don't know what to do when they encounter someone on a bike."

In Bridgeport, some bikers took making the roads bike-friendly into their own hands. Last spring, the 305 Knowlton art gallery hosted the Bicycle Art Show. Some of the artists involved gathered one night and spray-painted bike symbols along Railroad Avenue, denoting a bike lane. The lane happened to be part of a bicycle route the city was already planning. Shortly after the graffiti appeared, the city spent \$17,000 to paint an actual bike lane that includes Railroad Avenue.

The city does have a goal to install more bike lanes throughout Bridgeport, too, as outlined in its 2011 Complete Streets Policy & Action Plan, officials said.

Anti-bike nation?

In Congress, the American Energy and Infrastructure Jobs Act of 2012 that was reported out of Transportation Committee earlier this month would all but eliminate funding for bicycle and pedestrian improvements, according to Keith Laughlin, president of Rails-To-Trails.

"This is the worst bill ever," he said. "It's an all-out battle against any federal spending for anything but highways," he said. "It would eliminate dedicated funding for trails, walking and bicycling. It destroys a 30-year precedent of long-term dedicated funding for transit and it even eliminates the Safe Routes to School program. Unbelievable."

The measure also would make it all but impossible for unused rail beds to be turned into bike trails; 20,000 miles of rail beds have been turned into bike trails in the U.S. in the last 20 years.

"The rails-to-trails program would be dead," he said.

U.S. Rep. Jim Himes, D-Conn., agrees. "It's pretty bad," he said of the bill, which Congress is expected to vote on in coming days.

"About as backward-looking as you can imagine," he said. "Since (President Ronald) Reagan, we've always had set-asides for mass transit, bicycles and pedestrians, and what you have here is just an effort to put more people into cars."

Bike-friendly Bridgeport

Bridgeport is a bicycle-friendly city, resident John Wilkins said. Outside of work, he said his bike is his main mode of transportation. He said drivers in Bridgeport are tolerant of cyclists, even those who don't obey cycling rules. But when he cycles into the suburbs, especially along Post Road in Fairfield, he feels most in danger.

"In Bridgeport, drivers see people without best bike habits. Once you get out to the suburbs, people are unaware," he said. "If you're trying to ride the Post Road in Fairfield, it's scary. They're not used to seeing a bicycle as a vehicle in transportation."

Other bike-riders contacted by the Connecticut Post agreed, saying riding through the city's more crime-ridden streets, such as Connecticut Avenue, is more pleasurable and safer than, say, biking on King's Highway in Fairfield or the Post Road East in Westport.

"Bridgeport is a city in which you can ride from neighborhood to neighborhood pretty easily," said Steve Hladun, special projects coordinator for the parks department and a bike commuter. "The city is on the threshold of developing more bicycle connectivity with a regional link from downtown all the way through Newtown."

Other links are planned from Saint Mary's-by-the-Sea to Seaside Park and downtown, he said.

Learning to ride

Visit just about any college campus in the Midwest, and you're bound to see platoons of students on bikes, with scores of bicycles chained to bike racks, railings and light poles. That's not the case at Fairfield's Sacred Heart University, where a recent visit revealed only one small bike rack, with two forlorn bikes.

Meanwhile, SHU students, many of whom would only have short ride to school, say that they spend 10 minutes or more looking for a place to park their cars.

"Sometimes I have to go way over there," said SHU student Leah Magliari, of Stamford, motioning to one of the school's far-flung parking lots. "There's really no effort to get more kids on bikes, not that I know of."

Things are a little better at Fairfield University, where in recent months, bike racks were installed outside all the buildings, and the newest dormitory was built with an indoor bike room. A recent visit to the campus revealed that dozens of bikes being used by students.

Fairfield U. has also instituted a bike-sharing program, with 20 bikes, and they've been getting a lot of use.

"We call it the 'Borrow-A-Bike Program' and we started it about two years ago," said Ophelie Rowe Allen, who heads the school's Leaders for Environmental Action at Fairfield, or LEAF.

She said that the on-campus shuttle bus has been eliminated and freshmen and sophomores aren't allowed to have cars. Also, some of the campus roads are designated only for walkers and bikers.

"All of these steps are encouraging bike use," she said.

No place to chain up

But in other areas, the lack of bike racks are a big impediment to biking, cyclists said.

They're almost unknown at supermarkets, shopping malls and big-box stores, according a survey by the Connecticut Post.

While many public buildings are a little better in this regard, many aren't, as Mike Norris, of Stamford, discovered when he had jury duty.

"When I would get to (Stamford Superior) court, I'd have to chain my bike to a small piece of fence," he said. "One of the things that surprised me is that there isn't a bike parking area in the garage or anywhere on the courthouse property – I was always told to use the flimsy piece of fence."

Still, he rode his bike to jury duty every day. "The traffic in downtown Stamford is often at a standstill, so it was a lot more fun on a bike," Norris said, who also operates the humorous pro-bicycle blogsite www.diybiking.com.

A visit to the Westfield Trumbull Shopping Park revealed a similar situation. Racks for four bikes sit outside of Target's lower level entrance, and room for three more bikes is at the bus stop, which is some distance from an entrance.

"That's too bad, because a lot of people live near the mall and could easily just take their bikes," Mandell said.