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Pedaling changes: Lee's roads become a bit safer for bikers

BY ROGER WILLIAMS
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Steve Rodgers of the Caloosa Riders.

Call it the first gift of the season, ahead of Hanukkah (beginning Dec. 8), ahead of Christmas (Dec. 25), ahead of a new year that could promise fitness and pleasure for any who choose — a massive life-quality package delivered to 635,000 Lee County residents, courtesy of Don and Darla, Steve, Ken, Dan and countless other private citizens and local government officials who jammed hard for years to make it happen.

The gift: Lee is now a county made safe for pedaling, not just gas-combustioning.

Bicyclists can ride to or from Sanibel Island, for example, to east Lee County, Lehigh

Acres, Gateway, FGCU, the JetBlue Red Sox stadium, the major parks, Fort Myers Beach, Bonita Springs and Estero — and they can continue riding right down into Collier County, without getting run over.

A new report by the private, nonprofit BikeWalkLee, the citizens' engine that helped power up government awareness and passionate interest in "complete streets," lays out what's available and accessible to residents in each of five cities, along with the unincorporated neighborhoods of the county.

However, the report suggests that much work remains to be done.

"As noted in the (2009) master plan," wrote Darla Letourneau, a BikeWalkLee founder, "Lee County has significant bicycle and pedestrian facilities but they are fragmented. The plan identified 668 miles of bicycle gaps and 758 miles of sidewalk gaps."

But the gaps are closing. In one of many examples, 2.2 miles of new bike lanes completed in Cape Coral "actually resulted in a new 17-mile connected loop," Ms. Letourneau noted.

Long, safe paths



The Tour de Parks loop is a continuous 32-mile stretch of bicycle-safe paths.

in the know
BikeWalkLee is a community coalition raising public awareness and advocating for complete streets in Lee County. For more information and to read the groups' most recent Complete Streets report, visit <http://bikewalklee.blogspot.com>.

Meanwhile the gift, if you will, comes ribboned in two special features — two loops — that together comprise 65 miles of bicycle-safe paths, finally laid down, connected and marked by signage for any and all pedaling comers.

But those two loops, the Tour de Parks (roughly 32 miles, visiting eight parks or

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special sites) and the University Loop (33 miles or so), are only part of ongoing improvements across major intersections, and through neighborhoods and locations where bicycling once would have been considered impossible or highly dangerous.

"There has been a sea change in the way the Lee County Department of Transportation (in particular the Metropolitan Planning Organization, or MPO) is looking at road projects," says Steve Rodgers, president of the Caloosa Riders Bicycle Club.

Now, a road doesn't get designed or improved without planners considering if and how they should include paths for bicyclists and pedestrians, he explains.

Officials are also using grants, federal money, state money and local money — roughly \$2.5 million from per year from Lee taxpayers, according to Don Scott, director of the MPO — to put in not only bike paths, sidewalks and wider shoulders, but kiosks and special "wayfarer" signs, along with bike-safe crossing opportunities at major intersections.

And all of it is designed to help connect the already extant hundreds of miles of bicycle lanes or paths.

Mr. Scott suggests that in future, no retrofiting should need to occur. It costs roughly 10 times more to retrofit a major road for bike and pedestrian use.

"The biggest bang for the buck is doing a larger project and making sure you include bike/ped in it up front," he explains.

"Better facilities equals better access and better use, which not only helps those who already ride but encourages others to try it out," argues Ken Gooderham, a BikeWalkLee member and a longtime bicyclist.

For all of the improvements, Lee County still falls short of many exceptional communities in the United States, where planners and citizens worked together to create compellingly accessible complete streets for all users — Portland, Ore., or Austin Tex., or Boulder, Colo., to name several examples.

"For the number of square miles in Lee County (804 on the ground), our facilities are now average," says Ms. Letourneau. "But we've come from a deficit to get there, and we have a ways to go to become extraordinary."

Mr. Gooderham suggests a good way to think about the future, and act on it in the present.

"Think less about getting from Point A to Point B and more about making bicycling a seamless part of the transportation alternatives in Lee County, so commonplace that people don't even need to think about it or make it a big deal anymore," he advises.

"The county's complete streets policy is a great start, and county officials have been embracing it with more enthusiasm. But the real driver is people asking why their streets can't include bike lanes and sidewalks, and getting out to use them when they're built. That kind of bottom-up demand is what will really drive the expansion and enhancement of the bike/ped infrastructure in this area." ;

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