

Cycling safety in a two-wheeled town

Athens' cycling trouble spots and future improvements

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Jim Schulz was riding along the Hockhocking-Adena Bikeway with a few friends last year when he experienced what most cyclists consider an unfortunate inevitability. It was a dark night, but Schulz, who rides nearly 4,000 miles a year, knew the path well and had a Safe-Lite bike light. Although a Safe-Lite shines as bright as a car headlight, Schulz didn't see a board that recent rainwater had floated across the bike path.

It was just high enough to push Schulz's front wheel out from under him and cause him to fall hard on his right hip. The impact split his helmet at the top.

"My friends wanted me to go to the hospital but I refused because I knew what they would do there," he said.

As the unit manager of the emergency department at O'Bleness Memorial Hospital, Schulz knew that the staff couldn't do much beyond cleaning out the abrasions marking him all over. He also suffered a minor concussion, but he was able to finish the ride home.

The Hockhocking-Adena Bikeway is the main off-road path for Athens cyclists. It makes up a majority of the city's bike lanes, which extend over three miles. Apart from a few isolated lanes in uptown, cyclists have no choice but to share busy roads with cars.

ATHENS HAS THE SECOND-HIGHEST number of pedestrian commuters and the 11th highest number of bicycle commuters of all communities nationwide with similar populations of 15,000 to 20,000, according to the 2000 Census. Amherst Center, Mass., had the highest number of pedestrian commuters. Data collected by Bikes at Work Inc. show that most people walk in Athens. While nearly half of Athens residents do not



use a car for their commute, only 3 percent of those, or about 600 people, used bicycles.

Late last year, the city spent \$20,000 on a contract with Greenways Collaborative, a small, non-motorized transportation consulting firm based in Ann Arbor, Mich., to develop a bicycle and pedestrian plan. According to the plan drafted by Greenways Collaborative, the on-road and off-road facilities are not cohesive. Transfers between on-road and off-road facilities are not logical or convenient.

The plan, which suggests improvements for Athens' non-

motorized facilities and infrastructure, aims to double the number of bicycle commuters. However, the plan does not identify a set time frame to accomplish this goal.

In surveys and meetings conducted by the city for the plan, residents raised concerns about bicycle and pedestrian safety in several areas around the city. In southeast Ohio, Athens County has consistently reported the highest number of accidents in the last five years, according to data from the Ohio Department of Public Safety.

BETWEEN 2007 AND 2009, 27 bicycle-related accidents were reported to the Athens Police Department. Most of the accidents, which involved a cyclist and a car, were clustered on State Street, Richland Avenue and the uptown area. All these areas were identified as high priority in the plan. Despite Athens' hilly terrain, only a few reports mentioned cyclists crashing after losing control on steep, winding roads.

The blame for the bicycle-car accidents seems to be split evenly between the cyclists and the drivers. When the car drivers are at fault, it's always for failing to yield to the cyclist. Cyclists are usually cited for the same reason, though they are also charged for traffic violations such as ignoring red lights, stop signs and crosswalk signals. Five reports involved bikes striking cars in that same three-year period.

Nearly half of the cyclists involved in accidents were between 16 and 25 years old, which account for nearly half of the accidents in this age range for the southeast Ohio region. Two thirds of these cyclists were found at fault in the accident and most were traveling over 15 miles per hour.

Of the reported accidents, nearly a third of the cyclists were taken to Ohio University's Hudson Health Center or O'Bleness Memorial Hospital. The majority of these cyclists estimated they were going over 15 miles per hour at the time of the accident.

City planners hope to cut down on the number of accidents and make cycling a more attractive option for commuters by creating more bike lanes throughout the city. Improvement of bike and pedestrian facilities would occur in a piecemeal fashion with some changes being implemented alongside other city maintenance projects. The planners have developed near-term, mid-term and long-term plans for each problem spot including Richland Avenue and uptown, which have minimal or no designated bike lanes.

Richland Avenue is slated to have the most drastic changes, with the installation of a "roundabout" at the intersection of Rt. 682. That intersection ranked 78th on Ohio's High Crash list

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Bike safety

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for car accidents.

To provide an alternative to crossing the busy intersection, the city plans to build a tunnel under Rt. 682, which would connect the shared-use path on the bridge, to the Athens Southside Park, the Ridges and the north-south sidewalk network along Richland. Plans to establish the roundabout at state Rt. 682 are already moving forward. The roundabout is expected to be complete by early September.

Meredith Erlewine, co-owner of local cycle shop Athens Bicycles, said that of all the streets in Athens, she avoids Richland the most.

"We wouldn't even consider buying a house on that (south) side of town," she said. Part of the problem is that there are no designated bike lanes south of West Green Drive.

Six accidents have occurred on Richland in the last three years, and half of them resulted in injuries.

In 2008, Mason Rabbitt, an OU sophomore at the time, reported that he was unable to slow down from his estimated speed of over 20 miles an hour at the end of the Richland Avenue bridge as he approached a driver who was turning right off West Green Driveway onto Richland Avenue. He hit the car's back side and flew off his bike onto the street. Although he didn't realize it at the time, he

had fractured a bone and ended up at Hudson Health Center.

East State Street is another major problem area, especially as cyclists head closer to the OU campus. For possible short-term changes, planners suggested adding bike lanes at Carpenter Street and Morris Drive. At an informal recent meeting of the Athens bicycle and pedestrian subcommittee, residents pointed out that Morris Drive was especially perilous for young cyclists and that children had no choice but to ride on sidewalks in order to stay safe.

Planners had the most suggestions for the uptown area, where nearly a third of the accidents have occurred in the last three years. All but one of these resulted in injuries, and the blame was split almost evenly between cyclists and drivers. Planners recommended adding bike lanes to 10 different sections of streets, including parts of Court, South Congress and East Union streets as possible short-term changes.

Since widening uptown streets is not a viable option, planners recommended either removing on-street parking on one side to accommodate new bike lanes or using shared-use arrows if the city wants to retain the parking.

THE 133-PAGE DRAFT WAS released for public consideration in early March. The deadline for public feedback was March 25, and the Bicycle and Pedestrian Subcommit-

tee was set to review comments on March 29. The committee hopes to present the reviewed Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan to City Council for approval by June, said City Planner Paul Logue. If fully implemented, the plan eventually would add about 13 miles of bike lanes to the three miles that Athens already has.

The city brought Greenways Collaborative into the planning process, which also included meetings and surveys conducted by the bicycle and pedestrian subcommittee, to avoid favoring either bicyclist or pedestrian concerns. Transportation committee chair Christine Knisley said the city chose its consulting firm because it had worked with university towns before, could be in Athens for some of the planning, and fit the budget the subcommittee had in mind.

The bicycle and pedestrian plan is also expected to make Athens a more attractive candidate for transportation-related grants. A city that has a plan vetted by citizens and City Council is more likely to receive grant money for improvements than a city that has only a basic idea of what it would use the money for. Athens has already received a grant from the Ohio Department of Transportation's Safe Routes to School, and will be applying for more from the state and county.

The plan can also be integrated into other city projects.

"I'm going to use this plan as a guide as I develop other projects to continue to im-

prove the infrastructure of the city," said City Engineer Andy Stone. "If I do the work there, I can then make it better for pedestrians and bicyclists as well."

While the bicycle and pedestrian plan focuses on physical infrastructure, Erlewine said that employers could also do their part to help improve conditions for bicycle commuters.

"More employers could give incentives to people to bike by providing parking," she said.

Erlewine also suggested that employers could make the work environment more conducive to cyclists by understanding that "they will show up a bit sweaty."

While bike lanes are a part of making the city more bike-friendly, she said, "I don't think most people will start biking just because they see a bike lane. I think people start biking when they see more people."

How we did the story: We started by getting data on bicycle accidents in Athens between 2007 to 2009 from the Athens Police Department. The data, which is not searchable in electronic form, was retrieved from hard copies of individual reports that are archived in the police department's records unit. After getting the data we compiled it into an Excel spreadsheet and analyzed it using Access. The city data was supplemented with regional accident data retrieved from the Ohio Department of Public Safety's online crash database. Some data was pulled from the Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan

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