

Norfolk unveils plan for bike path network

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A bike rider heads down Granby Ave in downtown Norfolk on Friday, Oct. 9, 2015. The city of Norfolk is proposing to add more bike lanes to make the city more bike friendly. Steve Earley | The Virginian-Pilot (Steve Earley | The Virginian-Pilot)

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NORFOLK

Get a group of bicyclists together.

Give them Sharpies and large maps of Norfolk.

Ask them where they want bike lanes.

Then sit back and let them draw.

Norfolk city officials did this a few times and, just like that, the core framework for their bike and pedestrian plan began to take shape.

"Amazingly, they all looked almost the same," city planner Susan Pollock Hart said of the cyclists' routes. "And that's how we got the 12 corridors."

It also involved paying \$138,890 to a design group, an online mapping program and a detailed 150-plus-page plan. But feedback from those cyclists helped create the foundation.

Last week, the city rolled out the Norfolk Bicycle and Pedestrian Strategic Plan. It lays out how the city plans to create a network of bicycle and pedestrian lanes, paths and walkways along 12 key corridors - all of them connected.

It's been a year and a half in the making and, if fully implemented, would cost around \$17 million. The plan is in response to a growing demand for a more bike-friendly city.

But, of course, such infrastructure - which some say is long overdue - would benefit the city government, too. The ability to easily get around by bicycle is one of those amenities people, especially coveted millennials, want in a city. And the more attractive those urban settlers find Norfolk, the more tax revenue the city brings in.

"We're putting the sexy back in being downtown," Norfolk's Planning Director George Homewood said.

Pollock Hart, who coordinated the effort, and Homewood point out that the plan is not comprehensive. It is the framework on which a more robust network could be created.

"This is telling us where we spend the first dime," Homewood said.

But it would offer more than what the city has now. And on top of that, these roads connect to one another.

Granby Street connects to Ocean View Avenue, Ocean View Avenue connects to Chesapeake Boulevard, and so on.

"Everything's a loop in some fashion or form," Pollock Hart said. "If you want to go out on a 7-mile loop, you can do that. If you want to get to the zoo, you can do that. If you want to get to the Oceanfront, you can do that."

Tuesday evening, the city held a meeting to get public input.

Ted Drennan, a 33-year-old marine technician who bicycles about three times a week, said the plan is an "excellent first step."

"It really has been a neglected area," Drennan said. "I think the city has kind of missed the boat, but it's never too late to build it."

Drennan, who lives near Old Dominion University, said the infrastructure likely would cut down on collisions involving cyclists and vehicles.

As of now, "sometimes you can ride and feel pretty safe," he said. "Other times, you feel like you might as well be playing Russian roulette."

Drennan and another bicyclist who attended the meeting, Joe Morgan, were concerned the bike plan didn't include some areas with high numbers of low-income residents or minorities. Both cited West Little Creek Road.

"I think that was a pretty big oversight," Drennan said.

Pollock Hart said in an email Friday that West Little Creek Road was considered as a possible corridor. But it didn't make the cut because the design group determined that safe bike lanes or other infrastructure couldn't be done there, due to heavy traffic, the width of the road lanes and the width of available right-of-way.

Like Drennan, Morgan praised the city's plan as an "excellent start." The Ocean View resident also said a city staffer assured him that other areas of the city not touched by this plan would be addressed.

"I just want to ensure that all segments of the city eventually get served," he said.

The city has begun working on a small piece of the plan. It's a loop that goes from Colley Avenue to 35th Street to Llewellyn Avenue to Olney, and back to Colley.

That loop, which is being designed now, calls for a variety of bike lanes and other infrastructure, allowing the city to test them and see what works best, Homewood said. It also will allow cyclists and motorists to get used to them.

"This gives us the opportunity to put it on the ground and let everyone in the city play with it," Homewood said.

In a city where driving is king, motorists will need to get used to the new normal.

An advisory committee has been tasked with developing ways to educate motorists - and cyclists - on sharing the road. The city introduced an education campaign, We Roll Together, a couple of years ago with the same purpose.

Pollock Hart, a dedicated cyclist who used to compete in road races, has seen this issue firsthand.

"As a rider, there is not, probably, one time that I go out that someone doesn't yell at me to get off the road, get on the sidewalk," she said. "I've got a right to be on the road. And you, as a driver, have to be 3 feet from me."

She also said some cyclists need a lesson, too.

"You've got a lot of cyclists that are riding down the wrong side of the road, that are riding in places where they shouldn't be riding, and making it unsafe," Pollock Hart said.

Motorists are also going to have to get used to having less space. Some stretches of road would have an entire lane devoted to bicyclists or pedestrians. In other spots, lanes would shrink to make space for the new infrastructure.

"That's going to be a huge change, and there's a lot of that throughout these corridors," Pollock Hart said.

For Norfolk to truly become a city for bicyclists, though, the government can't do it alone, Homewood said. Employers need to get on board, too. That means outdoor and indoor racks to park bicycles. Maybe even a place to shower.

Look at Norfolk City Hall, where Homewood works.

"If you're going to ride from Ocean View to City Hall, it would be really helpful if there was a shower and a place to change in City Hall," Homewood said. "There's not."

On Thursday afternoon, bicyclists cruised down Granby Street downtown in the warm, sunny weather.

Several bicycles were parked on racks outside businesses and apartment buildings.

Manny Mojica, 32, lives in Portsmouth but takes his bicycle on the ferry across the Elizabeth River to his job at Granby Street Pizza. It's almost as fast as driving, and he doesn't have to pay tunnel tolls or for parking his car.

"It's just a hassle," Mojica said.

Mojica said he was glad to hear of Norfolk's plan for bicyclists. A cyclist friend of his was hit by a car last week on his way to class at Old Dominion University.

"He's alive, but he's probably going to need months of rehab," he said. "He wouldn't be in that situation if the roads were set up with bike lanes."

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