

For cyclists, mean streets of Edina may soon change

A city task force has offered recommendations to smooth the way to more bike-friendly roadways and policies .

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As a city that developed largely during the age of America's romance with the car, Edina has no signed or striped bike routes. That's an amazing fact when biking is booming in the Twin Cities and Minneapolis is ranked second in the country in the proportion of people who bike to work.

A new report from Edina's bike task force has an aggressive plan to change that. If its recommendations become reality, Edina will be crisscrossed with streets that have marked bike lanes, Southdale mall will have bike storage space, and the city will have at least a part-time "bicycle coordinator" to smooth the way for bike-friendly policies. Two major bike trails, one along a railroad line and the other along Nine Mile Creek, would provide north-south and east-west passages across the city and links to regional bike trails.

Heavy reliance on cars "affects the quality of life and livability of the city, not to mention the environment," said Kirk Johnson, a task force member. Bicycling, he said, "is a good way to get active and get fit. And it brings people out of their automobiles."

The 121-page report looks to Portland, Ore., and Minneapolis for examples of good biking policies. It suggests that Edina could copy Portland by adding sensors that allow bicyclists to trip traffic lights at intersections, just as cars do. And it recommends painting "blue lanes" that alert drivers to yield to bicyclists when they're turning across bike lanes. But most of the report's suggestions to make Edina more bike-friendly involve simple measures that work with existing streets, such as adding striped bike lanes to road shoulders.

Sections of Vernon Avenue, Interlachen Boulevard, Wooddale Avenue, France Avenue, 70th Street and Dewey Hill Road, among others, are recommended as primary bike routes. The report suggests the city adopt a "complete streets policy" so that when engineers design or redo streets, they consider the needs of everyone who uses them, from pedestrians and people pushing strollers to drivers and bicyclists.

On some roads, particularly busy streets such as Vernon Avenue, traffic may need to be slowed if it is to become more hospitable for bicyclists, Johnson said.

Young and old need safe lanes

The report urges that safe biking connections be made to shopping and commercial areas, schools, parks, civic and recreation areas. That should be done not only for children and families, the report says, but for the 23 percent of Edina residents who are seniors. The

report notes that in Holland, about half of all the trips taken by seniors are on bikes. In the United States, that figure is 0.2 percent.

Less than 1 percent of Edina residents bike to work, the report estimates. Among them is Johnson, who two years ago sold his car and began biking the 18 miles back and forth to his job as a software projects manager in downtown Minneapolis. He did it for environmental, money and health reasons, and he said he hasn't been sorry.

Rain or snow or stifling heat, he rides to work. In two years he has lost 25 pounds, and the 43-year-old said his doctor reports that his blood pressure is that of a high-school athlete.

"It's fun," Johnson said. "I didn't know I would like it more every day."

Dangerous sidewalks

Most of his scary moments have been on Vernon, where people drive fast, and Johnson said he has been honked at a few times or told to get on the sidewalk (according to the report, biking on a sidewalk is five times more dangerous for cyclists than riding on the street). While state law gives bicyclists the same legal right to a street as drivers have, striping a street such as Vernon for bikes would greatly increase safety, Johnson said.

The report now goes to several city commissions. Parts of it could end up becoming part of the city's new comprehensive plan.

If surveys are any indication, the report should get a warm reception from residents. In a 2006 survey of what Edina residents wanted in parks and recreation services, 86 percent of the respondents said the city needed more walking and biking trails. Forty-four percent said trails were the top parks and recreation improvement they would choose to support with tax dollars.

The report is available on the Internet at www.startribune.com/a3658.

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