

THE PRINCETON PACKET

SOLUTIONS: Is Princeton a BFC -- bike friendly community?

DATE POSTED: Monday, May 14, 2012 5:05 PM EDT
By Huck Fairman

In many ways Princeton is a great place to bike, with parks and paths, quiet streets, and many things to see. But a majority of residents express safety concerns, particularly for their children biking around. So, where are we as a community in which to bike?

Yan Bennett, who lives near Harrison and Nassau, rode her bike the mile distance to work before she had her baby and after work she would ride to the Princeton Public Library, then home. She was very pleased that she could so easily and cheaply make the commute (weather permitting) and not have to worry about parking. This convenience allowed her, on average, to use her car only once a week.

Artist, Princeton resident and avid bicyclist Ron Lessard peddles with Mercury feet and Arabian drum to his job in Trenton daily along Princeton Pike, making it in 25 to 30 minutes. For safety, he would like to see Princeton create real bike lanes with good sight lines. What exists are a few stretches of narrow, poorly maintained shoulders on which to bike, delineated by solid white lines. The police refer to these lines as fog lines, showing motorists where the side of the road is in low visibility.

Once Princeton Pike reaches Lawrenceville, bike lane signs and a more consistent shoulder lane appear, but again it is poorly maintained and sometimes disappears altogether. These conditions leave Lessard and fellow long-distance riders exposed to close encounters with hurrying motorists.

If you want to see a good, wide bike lane, cross Carnegie Lake on Washington Road, into West Windsor. On the national scale, New Jersey ranks 5th among bicycle-friendly states, according to American Bicyclist's March-April 2012 guidebook. But only West Windsor made it into their ranking of Bicycle Friendly Communities — communities that provide more facilities, education and safety features for riders.

Princeton's master plan supports bicycling. Under Circulation Goals, it calls for the town to "Provide a pedestrian and bicycle path network for maximum recreation and circulation use between neighborhoods, recreation areas, schools and shopping areas."

But has the town done this? Princeton has established a number of bike paths and multi-use paths and has painted sharrows, or bike insignias, on a few key roads, with more to come. The visibility of a number of crosswalks has been improved, some with blinking lights, notably on university property.

Sergeant Murray of the township's Traffic Safety Bureau would like to see more students walking and biking to school to reduce traffic congestion. A 2006 Princeton Regional Schools survey found that slightly less than a third of students do so. (Distance and safety concerns discourage many.) But the survey found that nearly 70 percent of parents would like their children to walk or bike, believing it is healthy and encourages independence and responsibility. Parents also mentioned, however, a number of safety concerns: too many cars going too fast, without enough proper sidewalks, bike lanes or crossing guards. Thus, while a significant portion of the

population is ready and able to bike in Princeton, a lack of simple infrastructure addressing safety concerns is holding many back.

A number of adults use their bikes as transportation to work. Increased numbers can be seen riding down Mt. Lucas, Jefferson, Cherry Hill and Great Road into Princeton and back, or into town on Washington, Harrison or Mercer.

Like Lessard, Tom Roddenbery undertakes a longer commute, in his case from South Lawrence to his university job on Alexander Road. He uses the tow path, which while safer, is not consistently maintained so that his bike speed is slower than Lessard's on Princeton Pike. It takes Roddenbery nearly an hour to make the nine-mile ride. He reports that as many as a dozen others share this route to work. The key to bike safety, he believes, is separating bike traffic from automobile traffic.

Another Princeton resident, Janet Heroux, observes that while in many ways Princeton is bicycle-friendly, and she commends the steps the university has taken, bicycling here is simply not "normative;" it's not in the culture enough to bring it up to the levels of a West Windsor.

Cedar Lane resident Steve Kruse, who has lived in Europe and elsewhere in this country, and has biked everywhere, agrees, noting that surprisingly few Princeton residents have made it a lifetime habit, or part of their philosophy-of-life, despite the reasonable conditions and obvious benefits.

Steve Kruse would like to see the street lighting improved so motorists can see bicyclists and bicyclists can see the road surface and pot holes.

Just how safe is bicycling in Princeton? Sergeant Murray reported there were only three bike accidents with cars in the township in 2011, and that was with a "considerable" increase in ridership.

Charles Kuhn, owner of Kopp's Cycle shop, advises cyclists to ride defensively and to be sure to wear visible clothing, and use the legally required lights and reflectors.

We don't have to look very far away to find a community that has made a serious, committed, on-going effort to become bike friendly. West Windsor has engineered real bike lanes, as well as multi-purpose paths. A trail cuts through the town allowing bike access to many sections. At the railroad station, the town has provided a structure for parking and storing bikes. The West Windsor government, as do many western communities, sets aside regular funding for constant improvement.

The West Windsor Circulation Element lists seven broad guidelines and goals for improving biking in the town. For any community that wants to encourage safe biking, the WW Section V – Circulation Element is a good blueprint.

Note: On Saturday, May 19, the township and borough police departments will be holding a bike rodeo in the upper parking lot next to the township police station. This is for kids of all ages, with courses to navigate, safety and educational instruction, along with free bike lights and reflectors (while the supply lasts.)

— — —

Huck Fairman is a local writer who in the course of researching another project was confronted by the overwhelming evidence that we are changing the earth's environment. And that will affect life as we have known it. He hopes to present the many good local responses to this situation that are already under way.