

Omaha to add bicycle lanes to some streets

BY KAREN SLOAN WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Omaha has many great qualities.

Bike friendliness is not one of them, as many local cyclists can attest.

But navigating the city on two wheels is about to get easier with the addition of designated bicycle lanes on some city streets.

Mayor Mike Fahey and leaders from Activate Omaha and the city's cycling community announced Monday that a 20-mile bicycle street route is in the works.

Fahey said the route will create "safe and convenient options for (bicycle) travel on our city streets."

The street routes will connect the Riverfront Trail with the Keystone Trail in central Omaha. From north to south, the Creighton University campus will be connected to the Henry Doorly Zoo.

The idea is to create street routes that allow cyclists to ride from the trails in central Omaha to downtown without having to use busy arterial roads such as Dodge Street.

The exact streets and design of the lanes have not been determined. Marty Shukert, a former Omaha city planning director who is active with the local group Bikeable Communities, said the route probably will use secondary streets that once served as streetcar routes. Those streets are wider and offer a place to install a bicycle lane without having to widen streets.

Signs also may be used to alert motorists to the presence of cyclists.

Shukert said that streets are much harder for cyclists to navigate than the city's trail system.

"Motorists aren't always aware that bicycles can be on the streets. A lot of people want better (cycling) facilities," said Kent McNeill with Activate Omaha, a group that promotes physical activity and healthy living.

Activate Omaha and Bikeable Communities, a consortium of entities that promote cycling, are spearheading the effort with the assistance of the city.

The bicycle street route system is being funded through private donations. The project is expected to cost about \$700,000, and \$600,000

has been raised thus far from the Peter Kiewit Foundation and an anonymous donor.

The work is expected to start as early as this summer and be complete within 12 to 18 months.

The bicycle street route is just one of several recent initiatives meant to promote cycling in Omaha.

Activate Omaha and Bikeable Communities have made available a bicycle map of the metro area, showing bike routes and trails.

"This helps people plot routes to take them one place to another," Shukert said.

Fahey also announced the creation of a new bicycle and pedestrian advisory committee to discuss proposed infrastructure projects and how they affect walkers and cyclists. The committee will be formed in the coming weeks, Fahey said.

Bicycle enthusiasts also have hailed the addition of bicycle racks on all Metro Area Transit buses.

Monday was the first day of National Bike to Work Week, in which people are encouraged to ditch their cars and commute on bicycles. About 60 cyclists joined Fahey on a short ride from the Gifford Park neighborhood to the riverfront and the new pedestrian bridge, which is under construction.

The ride also kicked off the Third Annual Omaha Metro Bicycle Commuter Challenge, in which teams of riders log miles over 14 weeks.

Cyclist Renee Carter liked what she heard about the planned street routes.

"Anything they can do to make it easier for cyclists is great," Carter said. "They need to make people aware that there are riders on the streets because motorists tend to take you for granted."

But there is one more issue she would like the city to address on behalf of local cyclists:

"There's a lot of potholes."

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