

Wheels turn for Lake Norman bike network

Four-county area has been chosen for state's first regional plan for lanes and paths to link destinations.

Posted: Sunday, May. 10, 2009

By Joe Marusak

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Jeff Archer pedalled 800 miles back and forth last year from his home near Lake Norman to the bicycle shop he owns in Statesville, using less-traveled roads.

He'd like to hop on his bike to get to his local library and ice cream shop, but car-clogged Brawley School Road in south Iredell is far too dangerous, he said.

"You can't do it without taking your life into your hands," he said.

But bike lanes along such major lake-area thoroughfares may happen after all.

The N.C. Department of Transportation has selected Lake Norman and its four counties for the state's first regional bike plan, a safe and lasting network of possible bike lanes and paths connecting to parks, transit stations, downtowns, the lake and other destinations.

Parts of the network could take decades to create. But DOT has already committed \$171,000 to complete a detailed Lake Norman Regional Bicycle Plan.

Residents can tell the state at three meetings around the lake beginning on Monday which destinations they'd like to see as part of the plan.

Numerous possible sites have been identified, such as Lake Norman State Park in Troutman, Blythe Landing Park in Cornelius, Beatties Ford Park in Denver and the Davidson College lake campus.

"Lake Norman State Park will be one of the main destinations," said Bob Mosher, principal planner with N.C. DOT's Division of Bicycle & Pedestrian Transportation in Raleigh. "Lake Norman is the focus."

Mosher said the network could also tie into existing bike plans of Mooresville and Davidson and Troutman's pedestrian plan.

The state is considering other areas for regional bike plans, including the Pamlico and Albemarle sounds and Croatan National Forest in Eastern North Carolina, and Old Fort-Black Mountain in Western North Carolina, Mosher said.

The state selected Lake Norman and its counties – Catawba, Iredell, Lincoln and Mecklenburg – for the first regional plan because of decades-long interest in a bike network there, Mosher said. He's traced the interest through news articles to at least the early 1980s.

Former N.C. Transportation Board member Frank Johnson of Statesville revived plans for a network circling the state's largest man-made lake earlier this decade. Because the plans had no funding, they didn't advance, officials said.

Mosher said some roads eventually identified for bike lanes could get them as the roads undergo other DOT work over the years.

"Too often the road gets widened, and it's too late," he said.

Archer and other longtime bicyclists are just happy that plans for a Lake Norman bicycle network are more solid than ever.

Archer owns First Flight Bicycles in downtown Statesville and belongs to a steering committee for the regional plan. The committee also includes government officials from Lake Norman's counties and towns and representatives from Duke Energy, which manages the lake under federal license, and the Carolina Thread Trail, a 15-county effort to connect communities and conserve land through trails.

A bike network will reduce obesity, stress and smog, Archer said.

Consider that a quarter of the car trips a person makes are within a mile of home, and 40 percent within two miles, he said.

Or that 14 bicycles can fit into the parking space of a car, he said.

"What I'm excited about," he said, "is that some of the problems we have today can be solved with bikes."

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