



City of Boise

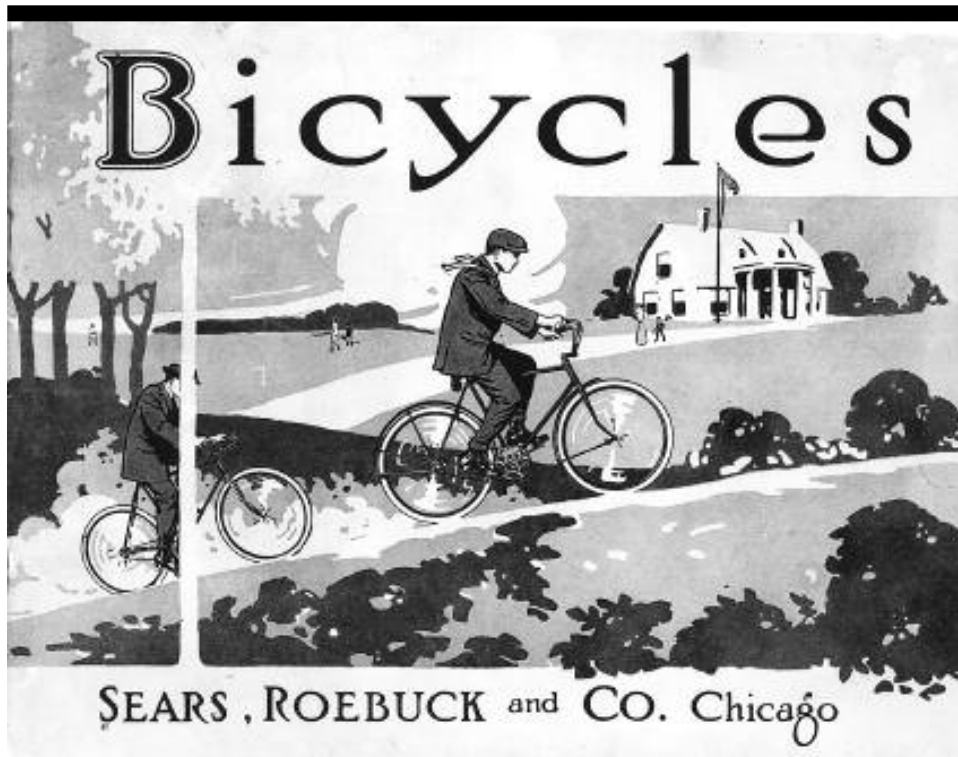
The League of American Bicyclists includes Ada County on its list of 150 bike-friendly communities.

Biking

BOISE

by Marc Orton

Wilderness crusader John Muir claimed he wasn't blindly opposed to progress. Rather, he was opposed to blind progress. Likewise, Treasure Valley residents are taking Muir's words to heart by responding to urban sprawl with a time-tested technology—the bicycle. This two-wheeled revolution has led to some eye-opening numbers. According to recent Ada County Highway District estimates, during warm weather months Ada County residents take as many as 55,000 bicycle trips per day, thus eliminating 37,000 miles of daily vehicle travel and reducing emissions by almost 60 tons each day. Impacts like those are certainly incentives to encourage more bicycle use, which is one reason why the highway district has drafted an extensive plan to improve the cycling environment throughout the county and its six cities. The Roadways to Bikeways Plan, approved in 2009, is a comprehensive study of the county's cycling infrastructure, with a long list of strategies to expand the on-street bikeway network, connect gaps, address constrained areas and promote alternative



In 1896 an alarmed Boise city council passed speed limits for biking. On boardwalks, within 40 feet of pedestrians, the maximum speed was four-miles per hour. Pictured: Sear's catalogue illustration, about 1914.

transportation in the Treasure Valley over the next 50 years. The plan also provides detailed analysis of the cycling environment in each Ada County city and makes specific recommendations for improvements.

"Years ago we used to spend all of our money on roads," said highway district commissioner John Franden. "There was an attitude in the community of 'Why in the world would you spend money on bike lanes?' There was no overarching plan in the past ... biking is a big part of the equation now." The intent is to eventually create an interconnected bicycle network to make commuting in the Treasure Valley more accessible through new bicycle routes, park and ride areas, bus systems and bicycle facilities. The plan offers recommendations to update the system of bike lanes and shared roadways.

According to the highway district plan, 95 percent of all the county residents will be within a quarter mile of a bike lane or route.

With one of the most extensive and celebrated Greenbelts in the country, a mountain bike trail system that is the envy of every urban area and a bona fide Olympic cycling champion in residence, the region's reputation is growing. In 2004, Ada County was awarded bronze medal status as a Bicycle Friendly Community by the League of American Bicyclists. While the majority of cyclists ride for recreation, there is a sizable number who saddle up for the daily commute to work. The highway district estimated that 4,000 commuters use a bicycle as their primary mode of daily transportation. In a 2007 highway district survey of more than 1,200 riders, 62 percent said that commuting to work was the main reason they cycle. The current Roadways to Bikeways Plan builds on two previous efforts, both of which improved the cycling infrastructure. The 2005 Pedestrian Bicycle Transition Plan laid the groundwork for the current plan and the Ridge-to-Rivers Pathway Plan built a multi-use path and trail system between the Boise River and the Boise Foothills. In recent years, Ridge-to-Rivers has incorporated more than 130 miles of trails. Roadways to Bikeways will build on the foundations laid by those previous efforts.

Another key aspect of the plan is safety. Concerns about safety have historically been the single greatest reason people do not commute by bicycle, as indicated in Lou Harris polls as early as 1991. A Safe Routes to School survey in 2004 similarly found that 30 percent of parents consider traffic-related danger to be a barrier to allowing their children to walk or bike to school. The 2007 highway district survey indicates that one of the main reasons people don't cycle is a concern for safety. Half of those surveyed cited a lack of bike lanes and too many vehicles as key problems with the existing bicycle network. Addressing those concerns is a major objective of the highway district plan. One new program that includes a cycling component is Safe Routes to Schools, which spends \$4 million annually to build sidewalks, improve intersections and make other improvements so children can walk or cycle more safely to school. "If a bike lane can be put in, we will do that. But many times sidewalks have to double as bike lanes," explained Franden.

Ada County and its six cities already have a number of vastly popular bikeways—the Boise River Greenbelt, Hill Road, the north/south connection of 15th Street, Warm Springs Avenue and areas on the Central Bench. And Boise State is well underway on a 15-year plan to eliminate automobile and pedestrian conflicts with cyclists and connect the university with the surrounding neighborhoods and downtown. The next step is to build a complete bikeway network that links a variety of destinations—employment,



Bob Mintony/Flickr

Boise police use mountain bikes to patrol downtown, the parks and 22 miles of Greenbelt. Founded in 1989, the bicycle unit has a sergeant and five full-time riders. Pictured: patrolling on Fourth of July, 2009.

shopping, school and recreation. The addition of support facilities such as directional signage and secure bicycle parking will enhance the network and encourage more people to bicycle, according to the plan. Of course, no plan is of value unless it can be implemented. And in many cases that leads to money. There is no budget set aside to fund the plan from start to finish. But some aspects of the plan are in progress, such as wayfinding signs on Parkcenter Boulevard and Hill Road, and sidewalk and lane additions to portions of Roosevelt and Boise avenues. Some improvements, like bike lanes on existing or new roads, already are incorporated into the district's budget. Now, whenever a road is expanded or rebuilt, bike lanes are included. No major road is built without a bike lane on it, said Franden. "The cost is not



Ada County Sheriff/keijohnson/Flickr

The environment for cyclists has improved since the highway district began adding bike lanes to new and widened roads. Pictured: Ada County bike safety campaign.

inconsequential." If you add a bike lane on each side of the road, that widens the road by 10 feet. Doing that for 3-4 miles adds up to a lot of land to purchase and a lot of additional construction."

An improved cycling environment is important to the citizens of Ada County because it will create a more multimodal transportation system that promotes bicycling as a practical alternative to driving, and thus relieve congested roadways, reduce dependence on non-renewable fuels and enhance air quality. The notion of interconnectivity and cycling-friendly policies is not a modern ideal, but one that dates back more than 100 years. In the

118 growing closer



Eric Maier/Flickr

Cold riding grows in popularity as the price of gasoline soars. Boise bike commuters have been known to stud their own snow tires.

Treasure Valley, the beginning of the 20th century was an age of multimodal transportation. There were cycling clubs for bicycle enthusiasts, horse-drawn carriages, pedestrian accommodations and an Interurban trolley system. There was a range of transportation options in this era, a time in which the Treasure Valley was connected by its first form of mass transit—the trolley. However, the heyday of alternative transportation was short-lived. By the 1930s the rail lines were paved over and the automobile was affordable enough for people to welcome it with open arms. In the following decades, the Treasure Valley made way for the automobile, allowing suburban sprawl to push development further away from the town core and increasing citizens' reliance on the motor vehicle. All of this had little consequence until decades later when air quality reached the point where Ada County was close to "nonattainment" status in meeting federal air quality standards. Cycling may not be the answer to low air quality and urban sprawl, but it is an alternate mode of transit that can play an ever-increasing role in the valley's transportation picture. The bicycle is a low-cost and effective means of transportation that is non-polluting, energy-efficient, versatile, healthy and fun. Bicycling has been growing in popularity as many communities like Boise work to create more balanced transportation systems by giving cyclists a greater share of the roadway networks. Smart Growth ideals work seamlessly with cycling; it is transit-and pedestrian-oriented and encourages a greater mix of housing, commercial and retail uses. Cycling, and specifically the highway district plan, meshes well with those concepts, which are gaining more and more acceptance. "Improvements to the Boise cycling environment are driven by changes in the attitudes of the public ... more people today want to walk and ride bikes," said David Bartle, until recently chairman of the highway district's Bicycle Advisory Committee. "It is very clear now that the highway district has established an official policy to guide cycling infrastructure improvements and to identify key routes for investment. This reflects an attitude that has been evolving over the last 15 years ... to recognize it is increasingly important."

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