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Local News: Rockford

Rockford is on the map for bicyclists

Local riders work to make the area more bike-friendly.

By Geri Nikolai

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ROCKFORD — When Scott Peterson bikes to work, helmet firmly strapped on his head, he pretends to be invisible.

"I take the attitude that no one can see me, and I have to look out for them," said Peterson, who bikes 7 miles from his northeast Rockford home to his job near SwedishAmerican Hospital whenever the weather allows.

A smart bicyclist using city streets has to be careful, Peterson said, but the benefits of biking outweigh the "near misses" he's had in 10 years of bike commuting.

"I started biking to work because it was the only way to fit exercise into my day," said Peterson, 48. "It saves money on gas, and it's good for my mental health, too. When you're outside getting fresh air and feeling the sunshine or a cool breeze, you feel more a part of the world than when you're trapped in a car."

Peterson may have more company on two wheels in the near future. Rockford is moving toward becoming a city that welcomes and encourages bicycling. Evidence of that includes a Rockford metro area bicycle map out this summer, believed to be the first such guide in the state outside of Chicago.

Prepared by the League of Illinois Bicyclists, the map is based on the experience of about 40 Rockford bicycling enthusiasts. The league got them together in January and asked them to mark maps with their recommendations of how to get around the city and to spot bike paths, swimming pools and parks. The response was put on a map, the first in a series the state league is publishing, said director Ed Barsotti.

"We wanted to show people that they can get the exercise they need in a time-efficient way and that there are healthy ways to get around town," Barsotti said.

The recommended routes classified as "good" include portions of Spring Brook Road, Avon, Cunningham, Safford, Windsor, Pepper and Arnold streets. Those classified as needing "caution" include portions of 20th Street, Samuelson, Morgan, Kilburn, Windsor and Bell School.

The established paths for bikers and walkers — with no vehicular traffic — also are marked on the map, along with ways to bike to them.

"What we wanted to come up with are the preferred routes, those with direct connections to community

On the Web

League of Illinois Bicyclists:

<http://www.bikelib.org/>

Blackhawk Bicycle and Ski Club:

www.aeroinc.net/users/bbsc

Rock Cut Trail Crew mountain biking club:

<http://www.rctrailcrew.org/>

League of American Bicyclists:

<http://www.bikeleague.org/>

Bikes Belong Coalition:

<http://www.bikesbelong.org/>

Form to figure money saved by using a bike:

www.bikemetro.com/calculators/cost.asp

Bicyclist-friendly cities

The League of American Bicyclists includes these Midwestern cities in its list of places that are friendly to bicyclists:

Madison, Wis.: gold standard

Chicago: silver

Milwaukee, Wis.: Ann Arbor, Mich. ;
Bloomington, Ind.; Schaumburg: bronze

Portage, Mich., and Rochester, Minn.:
honorable mention

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 Rockford Area Bicycle Map

destinations that are relatively safe," Barsotti said.

Bikers should have some experience before setting off to work on a bicycle, Barsotti said.

"Too often, bike education consists of putting on a helmet and following the rules of the road," he said. "There's more to it."

Police say most car-bike problems arise from a simple lack of respect.

"Some drivers don't feel they should share the road," said Rockford Sgt. John Pozzi, who oversees the department's four bike police officers. "Drivers ought to be treating bicyclists like they would any other vehicle."

"Drivers need to be aware they share the road with all kinds of vehicles, bikes, motorcycles, big trucks and others," added Sgt. Dave Hopkins, head of the city traffic division. "Bikers have the same rights on the roadway as motor vehicular traffic, and they also have the same obligations."

That includes complete stops at stop signs or waiting for red lights to turn green.

Local bicyclists say the city has a lot to gain by accommodating bikers.

"When young professionals thinking about moving out to this area look for what opportunities are present, bicycling is seen as an asset. It's family time together," said Gary McIntyre, a planner for the Rockford Area Transportation Study (RATS).

"If you want to attract businesses and families, they want to know about bike routes. Having them puts your community up a notch, and it's definitely on the radar screen for young people."

RATS has commissioned a study of a regional network of bike and walking paths. McIntyre and others hope it results in bike paths being painted on appropriate roadways and signs advising which streets are recommended for bicyclists.

Upgrading bike routes with striping and signs would increase bike ridership in the city, as it has elsewhere, McIntyre believes. In the future, bicycling could be a way to avoid traffic jams, he said, not to mention reducing pollution and income spent on gasoline.

Jordan Heimer, 19, figures he saves at least \$20 a week by using his bike to get to work and to travel seven miles to classes at Rock Valley College. Heimer bikes anywhere as long as the temperature is 15 degrees or higher.

"It would take me 25 minutes in a car to get to school, and it takes 35 minutes on a bike," he said. "And it's refreshing. You don't get as angry as you sometimes do in a car."

Cost is a factor, too.

"The cost of maintaining a bike compared to keeping up a car is very, very minimal," Heimer said.

Sue and Bill Tucker don't bike to work, but the husband and wife pedal 4,500 miles a year, frequently to social events such as dinner at a Perryville restaurant, a concert in Sinnissippi Park or a look at a downtown museum.

"We're trying to slow down our lives and smell the roses," said Sue Tucker, 50. "We know which routes are better, and we use common sense. We wouldn't ride on 20th Street during peak traffic time."

Until we make accommodations for bicycles and accept them as valid forms of transportation, we're on the wrong road, said Dick Bowers, president of the Blackhawk Bike and Ski Club.

More use of bikes, he said, would reduce health costs, cut reliance on oil, result in cleaner air and get people feeling more in touch with their communities.

"All those benefits, plus it's an easy way to work moderate exercise into your schedule," Bowers said.

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Safe biking

- WEAR A HELMET.
- SIGNAL YOUR INTENTIONS to turn or stop. A left turn is your left arm straight out; a right turn is your right arm straight out. Your left arm bent at the elbow pointing down means you intend to slow and stop.
- DON'T RIDE ON ROADS WHERE THE TRAFFIC MAKES YOU UNCOMFORTABLE. Bikes have the same rights on the roads as cars, but you need the confidence to assert those rights safely.
- RIDE ON THE RIGHT WITH TRAFFIC FLOW. That's the law, and it's easier for drivers to see you, especially at intersections.
- RIDE FAR ENOUGH FROM THE ROAD EDGE to avoid shoulder hazards. Don't allow drivers to squeeze by dangerously in narrow lanes.
- RIDE IN A STRAIGHT LINE. Don't dodge between parked cars.
- BE AWARE that people in parked cars might open a door in your path.
- FOLLOW ALL TRAFFIC LAWS, including full stops at stop signs and red lights.
- WATCH FOR CARS BACKING OUT OF DRIVEWAYS; those drivers may not see you.
- MAKE SURE YOUR BIKE has good lighting and reflectors.

Source: *League of Illinois Bicyclists*

Commuting tips

Pick up a free Rockford Metro Area bike map at local bike shops.
Determine your best route by looking for wide lanes, paved shoulders and quiet streets.

- Talk to your employer about where you can park your bike.
- Make sure your bike is in good shape and tires are properly inflated.
- Dress for the occasion and pack a bag with work clothes or keep a set at the office.
- Wear a helmet.
- Don't ride on an empty stomach.
- Get an early start on your first day.

What employers can do

- Provide a place where workers can park and lock their bikes.
- Give them a place to change clothes.
- Provide a shower for hot days.