



Biking data could inform city planning



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As more North Texas cities try to make streets and trails friendlier for pedestrians and bicyclists, the North Central Texas Council of Governments is working to help quantify their efforts.

The regional planning organization is teaming up with cities to provide or loan mechanical counters that can track how many pedestrians or bicyclists use particular trails or street-side bike lanes.

The hope is that the counters will provide data to the top-level city officials who determine how public funds are spent — data anticipated to support growing demands for more trails and bike lanes.

“It’s not just staff saying, ‘This is a good thing to have,’” said Jared White, bicycle transportation manager for Dallas. “It’s ‘The citizens of Dallas are actually using this.’”

Dallas is among a handful of area cities that plan to team with the council of governments’ transportation arm to use the counters to track trail and bike lane usage. Dallas’ recent city leaders have shown keen interest in making the city more bikeable. They adopted a bike plan in 2011 that is seen as a master plan of how and where to build out bicycle routes.

Already, bike lanes have been added to city streets, including over the Jefferson Viaduct between downtown and Oak Cliff. The city earlier this year named Ashley Haire its bicycle coordinator, in part because her doctorate in engineering removes the need for consultants to understand or implement the required technicalities of bike initiatives.

Council members last month also repealed an ordinance requiring bicyclists older than 18 to wear a helmet, a law many believed deterred more people from biking.

According to the League of American Bicyclists, bicycle commuting has grown 62 percent nationwide since 2000. Tim Blumenthal, president of People for Bikes, told a room full of the nation’s mayors last month at their conference in Dallas that many cities see higher property values around bike trails.

He also said more people bicycle when cities build concrete barriers between car lanes and bike lanes.

“So now, the cities putting in a protective barrier for bike lanes are seeing data anticipating growth in biking,” Blumenthal said.

Meanwhile, Dallas last month was deemed one of the least walkable big cities in America. In a study called Foot Traffic Ahead, George Washington University’s Center for Real Estate and Urban Analysis said the city has “moderate potential” in becoming more walkable. That potential partially lies in the continued expansion of Dallas Area Rapid Transit’s light-rail system. The city’s planned downtown-to-Oak Cliff streetcar line is expected to help, too.

White said the city plans to use some of the council of governments’ counters and some of its own to track pedestrians and bicyclists. He said exact locations haven’t been determined, though places like White Rock Lake, Katy Trail and the bike lanes on Main Street are likely locales.

Karla Weaver, a program manager for the council of governments, said other area cities' tracking of bicyclists and pedestrians often saw spikes during rush hour that suggest some people are walking or bicycling — rather than driving — to work.

Weaver said her organization's counters could see if the same thing is happening here.

"We're looking to see if similar patterns are in our region," she said.

Weaver said her organization hopes to be a regional clearinghouse for bicyclist and pedestrian data just as it is for statistics on car usage. She said a long-term goal is to see how people use bike lanes, sidewalks and trails to get to and from train stations, schools and large employment hubs.

"We want regionally significant corridors," she said.

Once high-usage areas emerge, she said, officials can go out and survey walkers and riders to get more information about how and why they use certain lanes or trails.

White said planners and officials will be able to better build out existing infrastructure once they have a clear idea on usage and demand.

"We know it's going up, but we don't know how much," he said.

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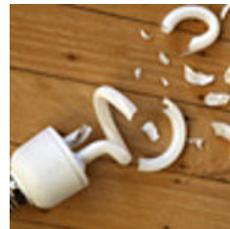
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She will find people don't use them much, because they simply don't exist in large numbers. The reason they don't exist, and Dallas is falling so far behind, is because her boss, Michael Morris, doesn't support