

Coleman announces plan for new bike paths in Columbus

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After a bike ride from City Hall to North Bank Park's riverside patio with about a dozen local leaders and bicycle enthusiasts, Mayor Michael Coleman yesterday announced the launch of Columbus' Bicentennial Bikeways Plan.

The city of Columbus maintains 87 miles of bike trails, bike lanes and posted bike routes, Coleman said, and it plans to add 60 miles of additional trails over the next four years.

"I am committed to this because it's the right thing to do in Columbus," he said.

Also, fostering alternative modes of transportation is especially important now with so many people strained financially because of higher gas prices, he added.

The mayor and City Councilwoman Maryellen O'Shaughnessy are approving the investment of \$255,000 to hire Alta Planning + Design, a Portland-based firm specializing in bicycle, pedestrian, trail and park planning and design, to create safer commuter and recreational bicycling routes.

"Too many people in Columbus have been hurt or killed walking and biking, and the city is refocusing our neighborhood and traffic planning to be bike and pedestrian-friendly," Coleman said.

Work on the plan started this week, as the city, the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission, Columbus-based engineering and architectural firm Burgess & Niple, and Alta Planning + Design began an inventory of existing bike trails, lanes and posted routes, as well as an assessment of support facilities such as bike racks, drinking fountains and benches.

Next, they will study vehicle traffic, lane width and crossing protection on bike lanes to make them safer, and Coleman said the city currently is scouting locations for a bike corral/locker/shower facility in the downtown area.

"This is an exciting project," said O'Shaughnessy, an avid bicyclist whom Coleman described as the "fittest elected official I've ever seen."

"It's a good time to be a bicyclist in Columbus, and it's going to get even better," O'Shaughnessy added.

Much of the legwork and suggestions for the Bicentennial Bikeways Plan are coming

from residents and local bicycle advocates who are members of a stakeholders' group that met yesterday to map out its next phases, according to the city.

The Capital Crossroads Special Improvement District - which consists of a 32-square block area of downtown between the Greater Columbus Convention Center and I-70 - also has made an effort to encourage local residents to trade their vehicles for bikes.

In June, the SID initiated a design competition for three streetscape features, including a bike rack; the creator of the winning design will receive \$300.

The deadline for designs originally was July 18, but it has been extended to this afternoon and Capital Crossroads has been encouraging local artists and Columbus College of Art & Design students to participate, said Chuck Hootman, owner of legal courier service Cyclo Space and one of the competition's judges.

Hootman also was on hand for the mayor's announcement yesterday and said he has advocated bicycle transportation improvements in Columbus for years now.

Chester Jourdan, executive director of MORPC, also expressed his support for the Bicentennial Bikeways Plan.

“Our bikeways and green paths are what connect us - they tie and bind the region together,” he said. “The Columbus Bicentennial Bikeways Plan is also good for our air quality, helps relieve congestion and enhances our quality of life.”

Additional paths also appeal to Central Ohio's young professionals who generally favor more walkable and bike-friendly communities, he said, and complement the Central Ohio Transit Authority's 266 Bike 'n Bus racks, which allow cyclists to store their bikes on the front of buses during commutes.

“There's a lot of room for improvement, but we're starting with a great base,” said Jeff Olson, bikeway designer with Alta Planning + Design, in reference to Central Ohio's existing bicycle transportation infrastructure.

In the last 20 years, 400 miles of bike lanes, paths and trails have been constructed throughout the region, and 100 miles more are being developed today, Jourdan said.

The mayor may be taking advantage of the new bike paths as they come along in an effort to get up close and personal with his constituents.

Coleman, noting that he's looking forward to the improved biking arrangements, said he took advantage of the past weekend's good weather to bike around the city.

Riding along “I got more honks and waves and 'Hi Mayor's' than I have at any other time, so I might have to do that more often,” he said laughingly.

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Columbus Mayor Coleman leads cyclists through the city as part of his announcement of the Bicentennial Bikeways Plan. July 26, 2007