

City Biking

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Traverse local cities on two wheels for fun, exercise and maybe even a speedier way to get around

Sharing the road

Plans and projects to improve city biking conditions

By Matt Ingersoll

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Whether it's a newly paved rail trail or a busy downtown street, local city officials, transportation planners and nonprofits have all worked together to make New Hampshire's roads increasingly more bicycle-friendly. Here's a look at how biking is getting safer as a regular means of transportation.

Manchester

Last month Jason Soukup of Manchester led the launch of a "bike school bus" pilot program, which encourages city kids in grades K through 12 to ride their bikes to and from school. The route runs the entire length of Elm Street, about four miles each way — now through the end of the school year, kids decked out in high-visibility reflective vests are led by parents and other adult chaperones and volunteers along the street's bike lanes to school. It's one of the several initiatives of Manchester Moves, a local nonprofit of which Soukup is the board secretary.

In addition to the bike school bus, Manchester Moves has a lending library program for all kinds of outdoor gear and equipment, including bicycles, which can be borrowed for up to one week.

The "bike school bus" pilot program, which encourages kids to ride their bikes to school. Photo courtesy of Manchester Moves.

"It's just really cool to imagine a world where kids can ride their bikes to school again, so we've been trying to remove the obstacles for that," said Soukup, whose own kids participate in the program. "I

just returned from a trip to Europe ... and it's just a night and day difference the way that bikes go across the cities there compared to here. So we have a big culture shift that needs to happen within New Hampshire and Manchester and we'll do just about anything we can."

Manchester Moves works closely with the city's Department of Public Works, which developed a bicycle master plan about five years ago with input from the city biking community.

"There are bike routes ... that the city has been working to label with painted bike lanes," Soukup said. "They call them sharrows. You see them in the middle of the roads; it's a white painted lane with a [marking of] a little bike guy on it. That's called a sharrow, meaning the cars are sharing the road with an arrow that says these are where bikes go."

Owen Friend-Gray, Manchester DPW's highway chief engineer, said that bike lanes and sharrows have been added to several of the city's major roads all within the last couple of years, including multiple sections across Elm Street and Mammoth Road, as well as on both Maple and Beech streets between Bridge and Webster streets toward the North End.

"We also just completed a rail trail project that was just over a mile long to help improve one of the last segments of the Rockingham Rail Trail, which runs from Manchester out to the Seacoast," Friend-Gray said. "Then we have other trails ... that we're working on parts and pieces of, like the South Manchester Rail Trail, to connect from the southern portion of the city down through Londonderry, Derry and eventually into Nashua ... So we're doing quite a bit, especially with the rail trails, to try to get better connectivity and rideability throughout the city."

Concord

In November 2010 the City of Concord released its first bicycle master plan. Craig Tufts of the Central New Hampshire Regional Planning Commission was its chief author.

A Concord resident, Tufts is also co-chair of a bicycling subcommittee through the citywide Transportation Policy Advisory Committee, which met for the first time two years earlier.

The plan outlined several infrastructure projects throughout the city with input from members of the biking community, many of which have been completed in the ensuing years.

“When we did that plan, we did a lot of public outreach and we learned a lot of things about what people wanted,” Tufts said. “We’ve developed great procedures for lane striping, which we didn’t have back then ... [and] we also have a lot more miles of shoulders and bike lanes now.”

The longest bike lane runs along the Route 3 corridor, Tufts said, from the Fisherville Road and North State Street areas of Penacook all the way to downtown.

“That whole stretch of road there all has a lane now for bikes ... and that was something that wasn’t there back before 2010, so that was a big improvement,” he said. “[Before] the Main Street project, Main Street used to be two lanes of car traffic in each direction, and it was just so much space dedicated to cars, and they redesigned it for wider sidewalks and better biking.”

On some city roads like Pleasant Street, the shoulder line was restriped to effectively widen the space for bicyclists and keep them away from passing cars. There has also been a switch to more improved detection technology for riders who stop at traffic lights on certain intersections.

“The switch to video detection ... is gradually happening as old signals are replaced,” Tufts said, “but in the meantime, we have put out markers showing where a bike needs to stop to get a green [light]. ... We did a lot of signals in the downtown area near the Statehouse.”

Right now, Tufts said, the most energy in improving biking across Concord involves connecting many of the rail trails in and around the city. Plans are in the works to eventually bring the Northern Rail Trail, which currently stretches from Lebanon all the way down to southern Boscawen, into the Capital City, while the Merrimack River Greenway Trail, a 12.7-mile trail running from Pembroke to Boscawen, has also been proposed.

“Pan Am Railways owns a railroad bed that runs from the Boscawen town line up in Penacook all the way to Horseshoe Pond,” Tufts said. “The Friends of the Merrimack River Greenway Trail ... have been working really hard to get the city or the state to purchase that property, so that once it’s in public hands, it can be used for a trail.”

Nashua

While the overall bicycle infrastructure within Nashua can be considered limited compared to Manchester and Concord, there are a number of initiatives underway right in the heart of the city.

Among the most widely used bike and pedestrian pathways is the Nashua Heritage Rail Trail, said Jay Minkarah, executive director of the Nashua Regional Planning Commission.

“It runs from Main Street to Simon Street, parallel to West Hollis Street, so it’s a pretty long run ... and in a location that allows it to be a real transportation alternative,” he said. “It goes through some of Nashua’s highest-density ... areas and is used pretty heavily by bicycles.”

The City received funding to extend the Heritage Rail Trail all the way east to Temple Street, which Minkarah said would effectively double its length. Officials are also working on a riverfront improvement plan that would increase bike accessibility along the Nashua River.

“There’s also funding ... to develop basically a multi-purpose path along Spruce Street directly east of downtown,” Minkarah said. “That would link the planned extension of the Heritage Rail Trail to the riverfront, so that’s really exciting.”

Safety first

Here’s a look at some of the statewide bicycle safety laws. See [dot.nh.gov](https://www.dot.nh.gov) for more details.

- Bicycles are considered vehicles — therefore, bicyclists must stop at stop signs and red lights, yield to pedestrians and ride on the right side of the road with traffic.
- Riding on sidewalks or riding the wrong way on one-way streets is prohibited.
- Stop for pedestrians in all crosswalks. Don’t pass cars that are stopped at a crosswalk.
- Helmets are required by law for cyclists under 16 years of age.
- Bicyclists must wear at least one form of reflective apparel, such as a vest, jacket or helmet strip, during the period from a half hour after sunset to a half hour before sunrise.
- When riding after dark, you must use a white front headlight and a red rear light or reflector that is visible from at least 300 feet away.

Source: New Hampshire Department of Transportation’s Bicycle and Pedestrian program

Joy ride

Urban areas offer fun cycling experiences

By Angie Sykeny

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New Hampshire has many locales for a leisurely bike ride, and its three biggest cities — Manchester, Concord and Nashua — easily make that list.

“Every bike ride offers a single story to add to the chapters in your life,” said Janet Horvath, recreation and enterprise manager for the City of Manchester. “An urban destination like Manchester is a great choice for a unique change of pace.”

Cyclists have “a tremendous array of choices” to enhance their ride in the Queen City, Horvath said. Hit some of the main attractions in downtown with a ride from West Side Arena to the Millyard and the Fisher Cats stadium, or a ride to Livingston Park via Maple Street, which has bike lanes north of Bridge Street, where you’ll find a hiking trail, Dorrs Pond, athletic fields and other amenities.



photo

Biking at Mine Falls Park in Nashua. Courtesy

“Parks offer a chance to commune with nature in the largest urban area in the state,” Horvath said.

In the south end, take a destination ride to Crystal Lake Park, which features a beach, a playground and a pavilion. On the west side, Horvath said, Rock Rimmon Park is “the destination park to see.”

“Cool off at Dupont Splash Pad, take a hike to the top of the ‘Rock,’ or read a book from the book nook,” she said. “Play on the playground, join a pickup game of basketball or pickleball and check out the skateboard features to round out your visit.”

Other bike-friendly features of Manchester, Horvath said, include bike lanes on popular routes, like Elm Street, as well as bike racks and bike repair stations throughout the city “to help out if your trip doesn’t go as planned.”

In Nashua, Mine Falls Park is the prime spot for a bike ride.

“There’s a huge trail system there, with miles and miles of trails that are all accessible to bikes,” said Jeff DiSalvo, Nashua’s recreation program coordinator. “The trails are nice and wide and well-kept, some paved, some dirt, and it’s just a really open area, so people can make [their ride] whatever they want it to be.”

The park rewards cyclists with a variety of natural scenery, including forests, open fields and wetlands.

“It’s just nice to be kind of secluded from the rest of Nashua and separate from the busyness of it,” DiSalvo said.

Concord’s trail systems offer all kinds of cycling experiences, assistant city planner Beth Fenstermacher said, from advanced mountain biking to easy street riding.

“There are a bunch of trails and loops out in the woods with different levels of difficulty, and then there are opportunities to connect to some of the more rural routes that go through Concord for on-street biking,” she said.

A painted bike path runs through downtown, where cyclists can enjoy the city’s shops and restaurants during their ride.

“It’s nice to be out on a nice day in that urban setting, and to be around other people,” Fenstermacher said. “You can stop and get a drink, or get an ice cream, or visit one of our breweries, and take advantage of all those amenities that urban areas provide.”

Horvath said the same of Manchester — that the city’s many activities and attractions are what make it an attractive place to bike.

“You can incorporate a variety of experiences easily in one day,” she said. “Ride to a park, swim in a pool, ride to a museum, see a matinee show and eat international cuisine all in one day.”

Jason Record

QC Bike Collective is a nonprofit organization that works to make biking safer and more convenient for people who live, learn or work in Manchester. It provides space, tools and equipment for community members to repair their bicycles at minimal cost and accepts donated bicycles to salvage useful parts and recycle them, or return them to working order and sell them at an affordable price. A few people who are involved in QC Bike shared their thoughts on city riding.

QC Bike Board of Directors and volunteer, both in the shop and for community outreach. Hooksett resident and shop user.

Do you bike city streets mainly for fun or as a means of transportation?

Mostly fun, but I did bike commute before Covid shut down my office in the Millyard.

What do you love about it?

I love the perspective and awareness of your surroundings that you just don’t get in a car. There are some many great street art pieces, statues, parks, and other features in the city that go easily unnoticed zipping by at 30 mph.

Any favorite routes in Manchester?

Definitely the rail trails, especially the refurbished Rockingham Rail trail. Lake Shore Drive is a favorite public road.

What’s the most challenging part of biking in a city?

Cars and distracted drivers

What's one of your must-haves for biking gear?

Front and rear flashing lights, high-visibility clothing, and a rear fender

What's one thing you would recommend to newer city bikers?

Get out there and explore, challenge yourself little by little, and enjoy the ride!

Tammy Zamoyski

Former QC Bike staff, currently Community Partner and volunteer. Manchester resident and shop user.

Do you bike city streets mainly for fun or as a means of transportation?

Transportation.

What do you love about it?

Everything is so close; it rarely takes more than a few minutes longer to bike somewhere vs. drive.

Any favorite routes in Manchester?

I most often take the Piscataquog Trail. It's a less direct route to my destination, but it's worth it to not have to be on the road with vehicles.

What's the most challenging part of biking in a city?

I'm still pretty new to this city, so navigation can be difficult. Sometimes you have to be flexible with your route if the speed [or] volume of vehicular traffic isn't what you were expecting. Also, the street signs around here can be hard to read, or even find!

What's one of your must-haves for biking gear?

Properly dressing for the weather can make or break your ride!

What's one thing you would recommend to newer city bikers?

I'd highly recommend finding a "bike buddy" or riding mentor to ride with until you feel comfortable hitting the road on your own.

Florian Tschurtschenthaler

QC Bike Board of Directors and volunteer, both in the shop and for community outreach. Manchester resident and shop user.

Do you bike city streets mainly for fun or as a means of transportation?

Both.

What do you love about it?

Biking is an efficient and fun alternative to driving around the city. Most of the distances within the city are short enough to be biked easily and especially around the center of the city it can be faster to bike than to take the car. Also it has obvious health and environmental benefits.

Any favorite routes in Manchester?

Elm and Chestnut streets are the best north-south passages. The footbridge by the Fisher Cats stadium is by far the best way to get across the river.

What's the most challenging part of biking in a city?

Many of the streets, especially east-west, don't have bike paths and the sidewalks are too poorly maintained to be a good alternative, especially in the winter when the snow doesn't get cleared.

What's one of your must-haves for biking gear?

Bright bike lights.

What's one thing you would recommend to newer city bikers?

The most important thing when sharing the road with drivers is to be predictable. Use hand signs and act as if you were driving a car. Take the lane if you need to. ... It's often safer than to squeeze on the side of a narrow road.

Scott Silberfeld

Long standing QC Bike volunteer – fundraising and for community outreach. Manchester resident and shop user.

Do you bike city streets mainly for fun or as a means of transportation?

Fun.

What do you love about it?

Good exercise, get to see what is going on around the city.

Any favorite routes in Manchester?

Through Elm Street and down Calef Road to South Manchester Bike Trail.

What's the most challenging part of biking in a city?

Drivers are not as considerate to bike riders as many other cities.

What's one of your must-haves for biking gear?

Helmet.

What's one thing you would recommend to newer city bikers?

Use bike lanes as much as possible and ride defensively.

Kim Keegan

QC Bike Board of Directors and volunteer. Manchester resident.

Do you bike city streets mainly for fun or as a means of transportation?

I bike for fun mostly. If I have an event or appointment where I think I may be able to bike there safely and it's not raining or too cold, I'll ride my bike.

What do you love about it?

Freedom from trying to find a parking place when I get to my destination, and the added exercise.

Any favorite routes in Manchester?

I stick to my neighborhood, primarily. Smyth Road, Hillside Middle School, Currier Art Museum.

What's the most challenging part of biking in a city?

I don't really feel safe in many parts of the city when I'm on my bike. I am an older rider and not in such great shape. Wouldn't take much for some younger person to jump out and unseat me, and take my bike — or worse.

What's one of your must-haves for biking gear?

A safety yellow jacket or safety vest, good brakes, well-inflated tires, water bottle, and of course a helmet!

What's one thing you would recommend to newer city bikers?

Drive the routes first and be observant of road conditions, traffic and speed of cars, and personal safety in the areas. There are areas that would be great to bike to, if you didn't have to go through bad areas to get to them. Do your research online first and plan your route accordingly.

Dave Rattigan

QC Bike volunteer and rider contact of Jason Record's. Manchester resident.

Do you bike city streets mainly for fun or as a means of transportation?

Fun (retired), but easy transportation also, which is fun.

What do you love about it?

Being able to upkeep a machine that takes you places by your own power ... but mainly coasting and maintaining a good rhythm.

Any favorite routes in Manchester?

Bedford to Lake Massabesic. I've been city riding on a mountain bike for several decades, on tar and dirt cut-thru's

What's the most challenging part of biking in a city?

Crossing the bridge of death (Queen City), or worse, the Amoskeag bridge.

What's one of your must-haves for biking gear?

Wearing a diaper and a single-speed mountain bike.

What's one thing you would recommend to newer city bikers?

Ride aggressively and find cut-thru's to stay off main streets.

Kevin Kingsbury

Rider contact of Jason Record's

Do you bike city streets mainly for fun or as a means of transportation?

Bike in the city for fun.

What do you love about it?

What I love about it is feeling like a kid again. Riding everywhere as an adult I did as a kid.

Any favorite routes in Manchester?

Favorite routes are any! But riding through airport terminals at night is great, and inner-city back alley loops are super fun!

What's the most challenging part of biking in a city?

The challenging things are like Dave said, bridges, and also surprise pot holes and people the wrong way in the bike lanes.

What's one of your must-haves for biking gear?

Must have a spare tube, and a mid-ride beer!

What's one thing you would recommend to newer city bikers?

Recommend riding with groups until you get comfortable riding the streets on your own. And find/make your own cut through sand shortcuts!

Brian (Beast Of The East) Cray

Rider contact of Jason Record's

I avoid the city because of road conditions.

Featured photo: The "bike school bus" pilot program, which encourages kids to ride their bikes to school. Photo courtesy of Manchester Moves.