

Best Practices in Bike Lanes



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Bike lanes provide space for cyclists to share roadways with cars, trucks and motorcycles. When properly constructed, a bicycle lane can encourage environmentally conscious modes of transportation while protecting cyclists from the dangers of driving in close proximity to automobiles. In some areas, bicycle lanes are further divided to provide a safe walking space for pedestrians.

Whether in a major metropolitan area or on a rural highway, the success of a bicycle lane depends on its overall design. Careful planning must go into the planning and construction of bike lanes. A failure to plan properly can result in the construction of an expensive bike lane that cyclists are unwilling to use.

When planning and constructing a bike lane, it is necessary to keep a variety of factors in mind. In addition to knowing the best practice for bike lane planning and construction, you must also know the best practices for bike lane *use*. Review the following information and familiarize yourself with the best practices in bike lanes in order to ensure the ultimate success of a cyclist-friendly project in your area.

Before Bike Lanes Are Built

Careful planning is key to the construction of safe, usable bike lanes. In

the planning phases of a bike lane project, you must take a number of factors into consideration. Carefully follow these steps to ensure that you have planned thoroughly for your bike lane project.

Evaluate land and traffic use. In order to build bike lanes that will be useful to citizens, you must carefully evaluate current traffic patterns in your area. What routes are experienced cyclists currently using? Are there any areas of your community that accommodate the needs of inexperienced or young cyclists? Identify top-priority routes that are already used by cyclists who commute to and from work or school.

Understand the types of cyclists present in your community. Many communities need to build bike lanes both for casual cyclists who want to get out on weekends and for cyclists who depend on their ability to bike to work or school. You should conduct a survey in your local community. If there is a bike advocacy organization in your area, be sure to discuss bike lane plans with its members. Understanding your community's makeup of cyclists will be key to prioritizing certain bike lanes and routes above others.

Check state and federal guidelines governing bike lanes. Before you finalize bike lane plans, it's important to check state and federal guidelines

governing such lanes. Be sure that your lane plans meet or exceed all guidelines. You may also wish to check case law or hire an attorney to advise you of particular legal issues with bike lanes and how such problems can be avoided.

Launch a community education campaign. The backing of your community can make a big difference in the overall success of your bike lane plans. Be sure to educate the community about why bike lanes are needed and where they will be constructed. Hold community forums and invite citizens to express their views and concerns.

Bike Lane Construction Concerns

There are a few major construction concerns that every bike lane project will share. The most pressing concerns regard the overall width of bike lanes and the buffer zone used to separate cyclists and motorists. Familiarize yourself with these concerns before finalizing bike lane plans.

If possible, build wide lanes that can accommodate cyclists riding side-by-side. In areas where it is possible, it is wise to construct bike lanes that are wide enough to accommodate two cyclists who are riding side by side. This allows experienced cyclists to pass slower riders without cutting into vehicular traffic. If building lanes wide enough for two

bikers is *not* possible, be sure to implement clear rules about how and where cyclists can pass one another.

Ensure that bicyclists ride with traffic instead of against traffic. Almost all cities that have bike lanes have constructed them so that bikers are riding with traffic. This is simple common sense and should always be exercised when creating bike lanes. If you are constructing bike lanes on one-way streets, resist the temptation to make two-way bike lanes as doing so may increase the overall number of accidents between cyclists and vehicles.

Construct wide buffer areas to protect cyclists from motorists. Most construction professionals and cycling advocates recommend creating buffer zones between cyclists that are at least two meters wide. If you plan on using a rumble strip between vehicle lanes and bike lanes, do *not* include the width of the rumble strip in your buffer zone calculations.

Re-evaluate speed limits for motorists. When building bike lanes on heavily used commuter routes, it may be necessary to re-evaluate the speed limit for vehicles. Evaluate the overall accident pattern in the area to develop a strong sense of trouble zones where the speed limit should be lowered.

Bike Lane Usage Rules and Regulations

In order to serve cyclists and the general community fully, bike lanes must be carefully planned and constructed. Solid regulations about how bike lanes will be used must also be put in place. Work closely with the cycling community when implementing such regulations. Keep the following key points in mind throughout the regulation development process.

Choose clear signage for bike lanes. Make sure that bike lanes include clear signage that is visible to bikers at regular intervals. Make sure that there are distinguishing marks to differentiate signs for cyclists from those for motorists. You may wish to use graphics with cyclists to add clarity. Check with bicycle advocacy groups to find out if there are common graphics used for cyclist signage in your area.

Impose penalties for cyclists who ride against traffic. Cyclists who ride against the flow of traffic in a bike lane pose a danger to themselves, other cyclists and motorists. Impose strict fines on cyclists who break this rule. You will need to work with area law enforcement agencies and your city council to create such rules.

Require the use of helmets while cycling. In many states, cyclists under the age of 18 are required to wear helmets.

However, regulations for adults can be hit-and-miss. If possible, require that all individuals who use bike lanes are wearing helmets. If you cannot create a law requiring the use of helmets, encourage it through public education campaigns.

Remind cyclists to use hand signals for turns and stops. Cyclists should use hand signals to indicate when they will be leaving a bike lane or crossing an intersection in order to turn. Using hand signals to indicate a turn is especially important in busy metropolitan areas. Be sure that including these hand signals is a part of any education campaign conducted in your area. Most motorists should be familiar with signals as they can also be used in a vehicle.

Restrict the use of bike lanes to cyclists. Pedestrians, skateboarders, rollerbladers and individuals using scooters may wish to use bike lanes. Carefully evaluate the width of bike lanes before deciding if individuals other than cyclists will be able to use them. It is generally only safe for skateboarders, pedestrians, scooter users and rollerbladers to utilize wide lanes that are not edged by parking areas.

Consider imposing restrictions on recumbent bikes and Tricycles
Recumbent bikes, or those that can be peddled with the hands, are often

lower in profile than traditional commuter, mountain and leisure bicycles. Because of their low profile, they can be difficult for motorists to see. You may wish to disallow the use of recumbent bikes and adult tricycles in bike lanes in order to protect cyclists and prevent accidents. Adult tricycles should only be allowed in bike lanes that are wide enough to accommodate the whole width of the bike *without* the bike entering the buffer area or a traffic lane.

Building Bike Lanes That Will Last

Many civic planners and cycling advocates consider the city of Davis, California, a prime example of an urban area that has successfully incorporated bike lanes into its landscape. Planners and advocates who are serious about bike lane projects may wish to visit Davis or speak with cycling advocates in the area to learn more about best practices in bicycle lane planning, construction and use.

Remember that the involvement of the *whole* community will be essential to the overall success of a bike lane project. In many cities, running animosities between cyclists and motorists make undertaking a sensible dialogue between the two groups difficult. If you sense high tensions between cyclists and motorists, hold separate get-togethers for both groups initially.

After you have created dialogue with both groups, bring them together to discuss bike lane plans. Remind citizens who are wary of public funding for bike lanes that such lanes are environmentally friendly and can cut down the overall commute time for both motorists and cyclists. Be sure to include an assessment of the long-term impacts of creating a bike lane so that all parties involved understand the true value of this important investment.

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