

Life in the Bike Lane

Florida cities are stepping up their efforts to become bicycle-friendly

by Erika D. Peterman





About five years ago after sailing across Lake Michigan, **Gene Pawlowski** was trying to figure out how to get into town once he had docked his boat. A local pointed to some nearby bikes and told him to take one. They were available on loan for free.

Pawlowski, a snowbird, liked the idea so much that he brought it to his Florida home of **Punta Gorda**. Thanks to a partnership between the city and volunteer organization TEAM Punta Gorda, that resulted in the local Bicycle Loaner Program. The program allows residents and visitors to experience the city on two or even three wheels by visiting one of six locations and renting city-owned bicycles from a fleet of 42 – free of charge.

"This is a community that relies on tourism, and the Bicycle Loaner Program is the best advertising you can get for being a great place to visit," said program chairman and TEAM Punta Gorda volunteer **John Baird**. "How could you not love a place that will loan you a bike?"

Punta Gorda isn't alone in its efforts to be bike-friendly. Through a variety of initiatives and projects, cities across the state are working to make it easier, safer and more enjoyable for bicyclists to navigate their communities.

It's part of a national trend. **Liz Murphy**, communications director for the League of American Bicyclists, which has recognized 16 Florida cities as being bicycle-friendly, said the American biking community has grown 60 percent nationwide since 2000, and more and more municipalities are trying to keep up by accommodating their needs.

"Community leaders and government officials are seeing the need to make their streets and networks safer and more desirable for people to ride bikes," she said. "Some are really putting in the infrastructure and other things in place because they recognize the value in having more people riding (bicycles) in their community."

In **Tallahassee** in 2008-09, the city and the Leon County Commission adopted a "complete streets" policy to ensure that whenever investments are made in new infrastructure, there's a focus on bicyclists and pedestrians, not just vehicle drivers. The city has integrated bike facilities into some of its larger capital projects, adding on-street bicycle lanes and off-street, multi-use paths for cyclists. Last year, the city installed Tallahassee's first bike corral downtown to meet the demand for better bike parking. Another round of downtown bike rack installations were rolled out this summer.

Local cyclists also benefit from "bicycle boxes," or highly visible, painted areas of roadways for bike riders to wait at intersections with traffic signals. Located between the white stop bar and the pedestrian crosswalk, the boxes put cyclists ahead of motor vehicle traffic at red lights. **Megan Doherty**, principal planner for the Tallahassee-Leon County Planning Department, said this safety feature decreases right hook collisions by making bicycle riders more visible.

The Tallahassee City Commission recently approved the city's first protected bike lane network, which will provide more than five miles of new bike facilities – protected and shared lanes, and on-street bike lanes – connecting major urban centers including downtown, Florida State University and Florida A&M University. There's also a Bicycle Workgroup, made up of 12 citizen volunteers, which provides the City of Tallahassee and Leon County with input on bicycle-related projects and helps to develop recommendations on cycle-related issues.

"The city and County Commission are committed to making it both safer and easier to get around by biking," Doherty said. "There are 70,000 college students at any given time in Tallahassee. Not only do a large percentage of their students cycle, but a lot of the professors and staff tend to be very active cyclists."

In July 2013, the **City of Inverness** completed its Bicycle Boulevard project, which was designed to get cyclists safely to and from its downtown using the nearby Withlacoochee State Trail, a major recreational pathway. The city's main street, Apopka Avenue, crosses the trail. Improvements included additional bike racks, sensors on the trail alerting drivers to approaching bikes and the widening of North Apopka Avenue.

"You can jump on the trail, come into town and find a place for lunch and breakfast, which routinely happens on the weekend," said City of Inverness Project Manager **Dale Malm**, who rides his bicycle to work from his home a mile away.

Bicycle Boulevard is just one component of Inverness' ambitious Bicycle Master Plan. Adopted by the City Council in 2009, the plan provides a host of recommendations to improve access to outdoor resources and recreational facilities "through a network of off-road and on-road bicycle and pedestrian facilities." It also aims to create a safe network of bike facilities in Inverness that link to the surrounding county and beyond. Among other things, the plan calls for safety enhancements, the inclusion of bicycle lanes on roadways and new multi-use trails.

The **City of Lakeland** boasts the Lake-to-Lake Bikeway and Greenway, consisting of on and off-road pathways linking local recreational facilities, lakes, historic neighborhoods and activity hubs. It has a number of planned capital improvements in the works that will add to an already robust system of multi-use trails and add bicycle lanes to roadways. Bicycle travel also features prominently in the city's Pathways Vision Plan, which was adopted in 2009 and serves as a blueprint for creating a multi-modal transportation system.

Like the City of Tallahassee, Lakeland has received a bronze-level award from the League of American Bicyclists in recognition of its bike-friendliness.

"We've made a lot of progress, and that has much to do with our long-range planning and the designation we got from the League (of American Bicyclists)," said **Richard Perez**, principal planner for the city.

Across the board, city officials and civic leaders say that having a thriving bicycle culture adds to a community's vibrancy and helps to create a unique sense of place.

"It certainly fosters a sense of community. It also offers an alternative for people to get out of their cars and enjoy their community," Perez said. "You definitely enjoy it more when you're riding a bike as opposed to just driving through."

When deciding which cities to honor, the League of American Bicyclists looks for the five Es: engineering, education, encouragement, enforcement, and then evaluation/planning.

"In general, we're looking for a place where it feels comfortable and safe to ride – a place where bicycling is not an afterthought," she said. "It's a proactively included part of the transportation network"

Murphy said there are simple and relatively inexpensive things cities can do to encourage bicycling, like adding bike racks and bike boxes. Those kinds of gestures send the message that bike riders are welcome in a community, and by making it easier for people to get around on bikes, cities are promoting wellness, she said.

"We want to encourage people to be active and exercise," said TEAM Punta Gorda CEO **Nancy Johnson**. "It's just part of having a city that (provides) opportunities to live a healthy lifestyle."

City of Inverness





Partnering for Safety

THE BICYCLE ACTION COMMITTEE TEAMS WITH SOUTH FLORIDA CITIES TO FUND BIKE-FRIENDLY INITIATIVES

In 2008, certified public accountant and avid bicyclist **Richard Cahlin** founded the not-for-profit **Bicycle Action Committee (BAC)**, which so far has partnered with 14 South Florida cities to promote bike safety and awareness in a unique way: The BAC raises money by selling bicycle apparel featuring participating cities' seals and colors, and the proceeds go back to those cities to help fund their bicycle safety initiatives and projects, such as adding bike racks. The clothing displays visual safety monikers that alert oncoming vehicles to use caution when approaching cyclists. "The more people see that city logo and the safety moniker (on the apparel) . . .," Cahlin said, "the more people will say, 'Hey, let's slow down. Let's give them their three feet.'"

Participating cities include **Coral Gables, Fort Lauderdale, Miami,** and **Miami Beach** and the **Village of Pinecrest**. To learn more about the BAC, visit <http://bicycleactioncommittee.com/>.

Between the city and TEAM, we are committed to providing the resources for that to happen."

Run by volunteers, Punta Gorda's Bicycle Loaner Program fully pays for itself. Each bicycle is sponsored, and those sponsorships allow the city and TEAM Punta Gorda to replace the bicycles every few years. More than 5,000 people took advantage of the program last year, and many of them were visitors, Johnson said.

Local bike riders can also take advantage of Punta Gorda Pathways, an 18-mile system of bike and pedestrian trails connecting neighborhoods, parks and commercial areas. City Manager **Howard Kunik** sets a prominent example by leading a leisurely bicycle tour through the city during the annual Pedal

and Play spring event, which draws more than 600 riders. During Kunik's tour, cyclists get an education about local history as well as information about projects taking place in Punta Gorda.

"It's so popular," Johnson said about the tour. "This year, there were 70 people who signed up for it."

Baird said that visitors to the city not only respond enthusiastically to the local pro-bicycle ethos, but they also spread the word.

"People just love it, and then they go home and tell their friends," he said. "I would not be surprised if the record showed that we had perhaps 40 states represented last year and at least a dozen foreign countries. It's a very popular program."

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City of Lakeland



Lakeland **Mayor Howard Wiggs** (third from left) during Cyclemania.

