

City tries to make San Antonio a safer place for cyclists



Image 1 out of 5

The bike lane (lower left) on Theo street between I-35 and Zarzamora is delineated by a painted stripe and marked by signs. The city had proposed removing the lanes to make way for parking but an outcry from the bike community seems to have made the city rethink that.

By Vianna Davila

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SAN ANTONIO — A little more than 10 years ago, San Antonio was not a particularly friendly place for anyone traveling on two wheels. It had only 36 miles of bike infrastructure, placing it in the bottom third of the 50 largest U.S. cities.

But much has changed since then. There now are more than 400 miles of infrastructure citywide, which includes bike lanes, bike routes and improved shoulders.

Of those, 40 miles were added in the past two years, since San Antonio adopted a bicycle master plan.

That number excludes the city's 45-mile greenway trail system, a network that officials hope will almost double and eventually surround the city.

“The more we can, as a city, tie our networks together, the better it's going to be for everyone,” said Julia Murphy, the city's bike

manager.

However, BikeTexas, an Austin-based bike advocacy and safety organization, says for all its improvements, the city still has a long way to go.

“This is the BikeTexas perspective on San Antonio: They're still moving backwards on bikes,” said Jack Sanford, BikeTexas membership coordinator.

He applauded the city's greenway trails network, calling “it the best network of off-street trails in the state.” But more work can be done to incorporate bike infrastructure into street improvement projects.

Most recently, BikeTexas has raised concerns about a proposal to remove bike lanes from a stretch of Theo Avenue and West Malone on the South Side as part of a plan to improve the street.

The city has said the design for this project hasn't been finalized, so it's not certain that the bike lanes, which are delineated by white paint on the road surface, will be removed.

City staffers and then-District 5 Councilman David Medina met with community members in the spring to discuss the project, part of the 2012 city bond street improvements program.

Attendees were shown four different street concepts, one of which was a bike route — no markings on the street but there would be signs to indicate a shared route with vehicles.

Community members at the meeting said they liked removing the bike lanes on Theo and Malone, between Zarzamora Street and Interstate 35, to incorporate on-street parking, plus sidewalks and landscape improvements.

Residents were “very concerned about maintaining the on-street parking,” said Mike Frisbie, director of the Capital Improvements

Management Services Department.

But that proposal sparked an outcry from BikeTexas, which issued an action alert Dec. 9 and set up a petition, calling for the bike lanes to be preserved.

Sanford called removing the bike lanes “dangerous.” Cyclists usually are traveling 10 to 15 mph. Vehicles on a street like Theo or Malone usually are traveling 30 mph — potentially deadly to someone on a bicycle.

“There's definitely different levels of safety on a road,” Sanford said. “The most safe thing for people on bikes is to be separated physically from the flow of traffic.”

He noted a wide shoulder on a Loop 1604 access road that cyclists frequently used was eliminated when a new interchange was constructed at U.S. 281. The Texas Department of Transportation is redoing the striping to create a wider lane that can be used by vehicles and cyclists, said Bexar County Public Works Director Renee Green. The wider lane should be done by the end of the month.

Five cyclists have been killed in traffic accidents in San Antonio this year, the highest number of bike-related deaths in a single year in the past decade, Police Department information indicates.

Frisbie said he plans to meet with Sanford, and the city will finalize its design for the Theo and Malone project in the next two months. He emphasized removal of the bike lanes is not set in stone.

“We're still exploring some options of how to incorporate room for traffic, room for on-street parking, room for landscaping and room for bicyclists,” Frisbie said.

Keeping lanes

District 5 Councilwoman Shirley Gonzales, who defeated Medina in a runoff election in June, said she would like to save the bike lanes if the residents will reconsider the original proposal.

“There is a way to do everything we need to do and maintain the bike lanes,” said Gonzales, an avid cyclist who called bike lanes consistent with the goals set out in SA 2020 and the city’s “complete streets” policy.

Frisbie noted the city has incorporated bike facilities into a number of projects, including a three-mile stretch of Bulverde Road north of Loop 1604 that will have striped bike lanes. The city plans to build a hike-and-bike trail on Hausman Road.

San Antonio was the first city in Texas to launch a bike share program, called B-cycle, in March 2011. Up to 18 new B-cycle stations will be installed next year, Murphy said, adding to the nearly 50 now.

In 2014, the city plans to add an additional 33 miles of bike infrastructure, funded by the city’s Infrastructure Management Program and 2012 bond dollars.

City officials hope to one day increase that to 1,718 miles.

Murphy’s department also is working with the city’s Parks and Recreation Department to develop a Greenway Trails Companion, an initiative to teach school-age children about bike etiquette and safety.

Another goal is to improve bicycle signs next year and add more bike parking across the city. If a business agrees to pay for the installation of a bike rack, the city will supply the rack for free.

Officials also plan to increase outreach to the community as the city embarks on more complicated bike projects, particularly those that might require taking away lanes for vehicular traffic in order to add more facilities for cyclists, Deputy City Manager Peter Zanoni said during a Dec. 4 briefing to the City Council about bike facilities.

City staffers will update council members again in February.

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Bike charts online

www.sametroplan.org/Bike-Ped/index.html

www.sanantonio.gov/SABikes/MapsAndTrails.aspx

www.sanantonio.gov/Parksandrec/greenway_trails.aspx

<https://sanantonio.bcycle.com/home.aspx>

Bicycle resources

Bicycle information and maps

Greenways

Bike sharing program

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