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Bicycling for Thinner Texans and New Businesses

By AMAN BATHEJA

In Fort Worth, the mayor hosts occasional bicycle rides called Rolling Town Halls. The Dallas City Council may soon require new businesses to set aside space for bicycle parking. Over in El Paso, officials are developing plans for a bike-share system, which is expected to be the fifth such program in the state after Austin's makes its debut this year.

In car-clogged communities around Texas, a biking movement is gaining speed. Midsize and large cities are expanding bike trails and putting roads on "lane diets" to accommodate bike lanes.

"Biking has just exploded over the last year in Houston," said Laura Spanjian, director of Mayor Annise Parker's office of sustainability.

While curbing traffic and air pollution prompted earlier interest in such initiatives, those concerns are now overshadowed in some cities by other motivating factors, particularly boosts to public health, quality of life and economic development.

"It's really being embraced for solving a lot of problems. It's not this sort of fringe tree-hugger issue anymore," said Linda DuPriest, a former bicycle-pedestrian program coordinator for Austin who is now a senior planner for Alta Planning + Design, a Portland, Ore.-based design firm that focuses on bike infrastructure. In June, Ms. DuPriest opened the agency's Texas office in Dallas.

"Texas is really ripe" for an expansion in bike infrastructure, said Mia Birk, the firm's president and a former bicycle program manager with the City of Portland, widely regarded as a national model for biking infrastructure. "There's so many cities that are growing and thriving, and really looking for ways to create healthier opportunities for residents and businesses."

Rising **obesity** rates across the country have drawn increased attention to Texas, where two-thirds of residents are overweight or clinically obese. The unwanted publicity of landing high on various "fattest cities" lists has heightened interest in doing more to encourage bicycle use, according to some city officials.

"I think what made city leaders take notice is we kept getting on lists that didn't look so good for the city," said Julia Murphy, a biking manager in San Antonio's sustainability department. "We were all tired of having that reputation."

In Brownsville, the health argument, along with the prospect of drawing more jobs to the border city, has helped increase support for expanding bike lanes and closing off some city streets several times a year for biking events, according to Ramiro Gonzalez, the city's planning director.

"We have a high obesity rate here in Brownsville, so the idea kind of stemmed out from that," Mr. Gonzalez said. "The research shows it's just a domino effect. If you have a healthier population, you might attract different kinds of business and corporations."

For many longtime biking advocates, there is a sense of momentum around Texas that was not there even a few years ago.

"People who are trying to attract people and businesses to their cities get it," said Robin Stallings of BikeTexas, an advocacy group. "If they want to get their kids to come back after college, if they want to get any kind of high-tech industry, they need this stuff."

"Our population is trending younger, and I think younger populations are wanting more density and want to live closer to where they live, play, shop and eat," Ms. Spanjian said.

The recent creation and expansion of bike-share systems in three Texas cities has both promoted biking and fueled increased calls for expanding biking infrastructure in those communities. San Antonio introduced the state's first bike-share system in 2011 with 13 stations, Ms. Murphy said. By the end of August, the city will have 52 stations and 500 bikes.

Houston followed suit in 2012, and then Fort Worth began its system in April. Austin plans to have the first 10 stations of a planned 40-station system operating by the end of this year.

In all four cities, initial financing for the bike-share systems came from a mix of public grants and private donations and sponsorships.

"I don't think it's a coincidence that within two years of each other, we have four Texas cities with bike-share programs," Ms. Spanjian said.

Developing such programs in Texas poses unique challenges, Ms. Birk said, because the cities are more spread out and less crowded than in many other states. "When you have very high density but that smaller footprint, you also have a competition over space and a lot of humans debating how we use that space," Ms. Birk said. Many Texas cities, she said, have almost the opposite problem: so much space that it is more difficult to convince people that biking is a practical way to get around.

Advocates often stress the value of biking for short trips and as a means of connecting with public transportation.

"About two to three miles is the sweet spot where it really can be more efficient and faster to take a bike," said Annick Beaudet, a City of Austin planner who had previously worked as bicycle program manager for the city.

Gannon Gries, who moved to Fort Worth in 2004, regularly commutes via bike to his office at a downtown architectural firm. The three-mile route, and biking in the city in general, has become easier in recent years, he said.

"When I first started, there were no bike lanes, no nothing — just the Trinity Trails around the river," Mr. Gries said. "Now there's a lot more signage, and there's dedicated lanes."

In Texas, where strong population growth has lawmakers in a constant search for more highway construction financing, city officials are balancing efforts to maintain and expand vehicular capacity while still encouraging new bike lanes and trails.

Julia McCleary, a Fort Worth senior planner, said the city's strategy had been to encourage cyclists to use roads that were originally built to accommodate more traffic than they currently receive.

"They were roads that perhaps served a greater purpose 40 years ago, but now that there's a freeway nearby, there's a lot of excess capacity," she said.

Advocates say the goal is to see bicycle use become more common around the state, even if, in most cases, bikes only supplement a transportation routine that still relies more on automobiles.

"We're not trying to take away cars," Ms. Murphy said. "That's the fine line you walk. Our media campaign is 'There's enough road to go around.'"

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