

Getting People to use bicycle paths

By Gil Woolley/Special to the TAB

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Last December, in a program at the Newton Free Library, Northeastern University Professor Peter Furst described how his students were helping Boston set up a network of bicycle paths in the city. In his introductory remarks Professor Furth presented a graph that showed that there is a very strong relationship between “stress” and the number of people who use bicycle paths. Most bicyclists feel stress when sharing a road with automobile traffic, even if they are in a marked lane. They also feel stress when a family member, especially a child or teenager, is sharing a road with auto traffic. The easiest way to avoid this stress is to avoid the situation – that is, not to bicycle – which is the solution most people choose. A bicycle program should be judged by its success in attracting people who are not athletic, who do not identify themselves as “bicyclists” and are not “brave”.

The success of “off road” bicycle trails in the US, around the world, and locally, the Minutemen Trail, (from Cambridge to Bedford) confirms Professor Furth’s belief. At certain places and times of day and week the problem with the Minuteman is overuse – by bicycles, skateboards, baby-buggies and pedestrians. The solution is a wider paved path with some separation of users. After a snowfall the Minuteman becomes a very popular cross-country skiing trail – another fun way to get to school.

Professor Furth’s students try to determine desirable destinations, such as schools, T stops and libraries, then to find safe routes to reach them that avoid busy streets. Ideally, these routes pass through parks and conservation land, but sometimes, little used local streets are used. There are also places where major arteries must be crossed. In these cases, the students propose redesign of intersections to provide physical separation of bicyclists and automobiles and lead to places where crossing the roads is safe because there are traffic lights, sometimes cyclist controlled.

A similar program should be much easier to implement in Newton because the city is more open than most of Boston. Bicycle paths could be routed through parks, open spaces, cemeteries and sometimes on publicly owned land along highways, but physically separated from vehicular traffic.

Use of trails would increase if there were signs at points where a trail intersected with streets, signs like “Newton South half a mile” or “Echo Bridge one mile”. Signs assure users that they are not trespassing and, if parents are nervous about safety, they can check out the route and be assured that it is reasonably safe.

A program to create and sign safe routes to school would encourage healthy exercise by students, reduce traffic congestion in the mornings and afternoons and reduce the burden on parents of transporting children to and from schools. It would also make students more independent and introduce them to the concept of looking after themselves.

It would also provide opportunities for volunteers to look for suitable routes and to cooperate with city workers to create them. A smoothly paved bicycle path needs significant funding and professional help but there are things that a willing volunteer with

a saw and a shovel can do. It would cost very little to create a few prototype trails, especially if, initially, they were more suitable for pedestrians, If these trails are successful in attracting users, this will generate a demand for more and better bicycle paths.