

Making Newton more bike-friendly

By **Gilbert Woolley**/ Special To The Tab

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Bicycle paths encourage people who are afraid to ride on the roads to ride for pleasure and business. Riding a bicycle provides healthy exercise without straining the heart and the rider is closer to nature and to other people than when driving. Using a cycle for day-to-day business reduces congestion on the roads and contributes to reducing oil imports, global warming and smog. Bicycle trails are also suitable for easy cross-country skiing.

Newton is not well provided with bicycle paths. The most interesting path passing through the city is the Charles River Bikeway, which goes from the Esplanade in Boston, to Waltham, along one, or sometimes both, sides of the Charles River. It is paved all the way, although full of potholes in places. It is managed, by the Mass. Dept. of Conservation and Recreation.

Although not designated a bicycle path, the "carriage road" on Commonwealth Avenue provides an outstanding bicycle route from Boston College almost to Route 128 and this could be the link to join various shorter trails. Cyclists can, of course, ride on the city's highways and streets, but for this lifelong cyclist, the main obstacle to cycling on public roads is fear.

A spectacular example, which shows how people will use bicycles when a safe route is provided, is the Minuteman Bikeway, built on a defunct railroad bed from the Alewife 'T' station in Cambridge, through downtown Lexington, to Bedford. This trail attracts over two million users each year. At times, this "Bikeway" is used too much, not only by cyclists, but also by skate boarders, rollerbladers and people pushing baby carriages. In areas of heavy use it would be helpful if these users could be separated. In the nearby towns of Hudson, Framingham and Natick, other unused rail tracks are being turned into bicycle trails.

Disused railroad beds provide ideal routes for bicycle paths. They are almost flat and there is conflict with automobile traffic only at highway crossings. Newton has an almost unused line from Newton Highlands to Newton Upper Falls and on to Needham. This line crosses the Charles River and Route 128 by bridges and would avoid the cyclist-hazardous intersection of Highland Avenue and Route 128. Other potential bicycle routes are the Sudbury and Cochituate aqueducts. Cycle routes could also be signed on little used streets in order to link cyclable trails in public parks and on conservation land. Proposals to create cycle trails often run into opposition from abutters, who fear that criminals will use it to gain access to their property. This has not proved to be a problem. Criminals, in this country at least, rarely ride bicycles! There has also been a fear that a trail would reduce property values, but realtors report, for example, that abutting the Minuteman trail actually adds value to properties.

Making Newton more bicycle-friendly could provide an opportunity for volunteers to work with the Parks and Recreation Department surveying possible cycle routes. The cost to the city would be minimal. Marking a street as a "bicycle path" gives people confidence that it goes somewhere and that it's OK to use it.

Bicycle trails do more than provide access to local stores, libraries and schools. An ambitious national organization, Rails to Trails, promotes conversion of abandoned railroad beds to bicycle paths, and has had considerable success. The East Coast Greenway has succeeded in marking a bicycle path from Canada to Florida, and every year, the Greenway adds more "auto free" miles.

Gilbert Woolley, a retired engineer, has been a very active member of the Sierra Club since 1971, He has led Youth Hostel bicycle tours in Europe.