Shedding the Training Wheels: Houston Bikeway Plan, Phase Two

An update of the City of Houston’s comprehensive Bikeway Plan is under way to boost Houston’s efforts to become a bicycle-friendly community. Many of the projects envisioned in the existing plan, developed in 1993 by the Department of Public Works and Engineering, are done or nearly complete. They include 350 miles of trails, lanes, and other multi-use paths. The most recent addition, the Columbia Tap Rails-to-Trails project, converted an old Union Pacific corridor into a four-mile paved path connecting the east side of Downtown to the Third Ward. A similar project, still under construction, will connect the Heights to Downtown via the MKT (Missouri, Kansas, Texas) line.

Dan Raine, the city’s new bicycle-pedestrian coordinator, is directing the Bikeway Plan. A transportation planner with 15 years of experience, including four years as bicycling coordinator at the Houston-Galveston Area Council, he has many cycling advocates feeling optimistic. After soliciting feedback through contacts with Super Neighborhoods, CIP meetings, an online form, and a meeting held with the non-profit BikeHouston, he received 600 responses. “Think of the Bikeway Plan as a 15-year-old teenager,” he has said. “Without direction, support, help, and education, you will have a troubled teen; you have to help this person grow.” Details have not been released, but Raine hopes to repeat and build on what has been successful in the existing network, improve safety conditions, and repair deteriorating trails and pathways.

Peter Wang, a League of American Bicyclists instructor and cycling advocate, points to county-wide problems that extend beyond the Bikeway Plan. “At the Houston-Galveston level, we need a regional bikeway plan that every local government uses,” he said in an interview. He added, “In some parts of the county, we are losing cyclable roads.” He also called for a better intermodal network whereby cyclists could access routes by public transportation. Bicycle racks on buses have proven successful, but METRO has not placed racks on its light rail trains.

Wang argues further that the development of bicycling infrastructure needs to be accompanied by a cultural realignment. Cycling continues to be viewed in the U.S. as primarily a means of recreation, rather than transport. The development of multi-modal commuting, he points out, would have a beneficial effect on problems of traffic, health, air quality, and fuel consumption. The challenge of Houston’s comprehensive Bikeway Plan is to both meet immediate needs and cultivate this attitudinal change.

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