



Pedal POWER

Area pathways, safety initiatives and local clubs help residents and visitors enjoy bike riding in the Lowcountry.

By Melinda Copp

Biking on Hilton Head has long been considered an island amenity, which has been enjoyed by locals and attracted many tourists. Several resident cycling clubs on the island organize regular rides, and 10,000 bicycles are rented to families and other island visitors each week during the summer. Plus, anyone who's sat in changeover traffic knows that many vacationers bring their own bikes strapped to the back of their cars. With 50 miles of paths on the public streets, another 50 miles inside plantations, and bike-friendly beaches, who can blame these destination bikers?

The trails are transportation infrastructure that connects key tourist attractions, such as the beaches, shopping, and dining, said Frank Babel of the Hilton Head Cycling Advocacy Group, an organization that works with the town to maintain the pathways on the island.

"The town had the foresight to build the pathways, but they didn't make them user-friendly with clear maps and accurate markings," said Babel. "We've been working with the town and they've really improved them."

Babel and the Cycling Advocacy Group help maintain the pathways by noting concerns and reporting them to the town every two weeks. They are also working to update the pathway maps and build new kiosks to distribute them.



PHOTOS BY KATHERINE MCKENNA

"Cycling is a huge market, and we can't take these pathways for granted," said Babel, who explained that 20 million bikes are purchased in department stores, such as Wal-Mart and Costco, each year. "We have the pathways; we just need to connect the dots."

This effort to connect the dots is spreading off-island with the Greater Bluffton Pathways organization.

"The situation in southern Beaufort County is getting better, especially for recreational cyclists," said Karen Heitman, president of Greater Bluffton Pathways, an organization advocating for multiuse paths and wider shoulders throughout the Bluffton area. "Those experienced cyclists that want to ride faster for exercise will need wider shoulders and bike lanes on roads," Heitman added.

One of Greater Bluffton Pathways' latest successes is a four-mile stretch of multi-use pathways along New Riverside Drive to Palmetto Bluff that opened earlier this year. Another involves the off-road multi-use paths that are going in along Buckwalter Parkway, and around McCracken Circle, a project they hope is completed by the end of the year.

"We look forward to children in the Buckwalter area being able to walk and bike to school safely now that McCracken Circle is getting a new pathway and the school complex will soon have additional interior pathways," said Heitman.

Even though residents and tourists have always enjoyed biking the paths and beaches of the island, as Bluffton and beyond continue to grow people-wise, biking is gaining in popularity throughout the Lowcountry. The number of avid cyclists, those who ride long distances at a time for exercise, is also growing. And now more and more experienced cyclists are hitting the streets of Beaufort County for challenging rides. But population growth not only brings more bikers, it also brings more motorists and car-clogged highways, which makes bike safety even more of a concern.

ADDRESSING SAFETY CONCERNS

With a hundred miles of paths, picturesque Lowcountry scenery, and a subtropical climate that allows residents to get outdoors year round, biking may be the ideal way to spend a day

on Hilton Head. But, the popular tourist destination's cycling scene has also endured its share of challenges and woes.

From September 2005 to August 2006, 43 bike accidents reportedly took place in Beaufort County. One of the most recent and tragic accidents occurred on November 18, 2005, when resident Nhiem Thi Kim, riding her bicycle along Palmetto Bay Road and heading home from a quick trip to a grocery store, was struck and killed by a local motorist.

This tragedy devastated Kim's family and rattled the entire Hilton Head community. With thousands of bikers taking to the island's streets each day, Kim could have been anyone's family member.

This shocking accident, and other bike-related accidents throughout the state, caught the attention of the local Chamber of Commerce 2007 Leadership Class, and prompted the group to organize a Heads Up for Safe Cycling community outreach program, which kicked off earlier this year.

Approximately 850,000,000 people in the U.S. ride bikes, and each year about 540,000 of those riders visit the emergency room with bicycle-related injuries. In 2005, 784 deaths occurred on U.S. roads as a result of bicycle accidents. The leadership class's mission is to reduce the number of serious injuries that occur in this area by reaching out to kids and promoting bike safety.

Karen Abbott, one of 18 leadership class members and new athletic director at University of South Carolina-Beaufort, said that in talking with area physical education teachers, the class learned that bike safety isn't covered in the P.E. curriculum.

"Most people learn bike safety when they take a drivers test," said Abbott, who explained that wearing a helmet is only one aspect of safe riding. Kids also need to learn which side of the road they should be on, how to obey traffic signals, and how to use hand signals.

The leadership class has participated in community events and gone to Bluffton Elementary, M.C. Riley Elementary, and both Hilton Head Island elementary schools to distribute information. In all, the group has distributed nearly 3,000 bike safety baggies, which contain pamphlets and



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activities regarding bike safety for kids in both English and Spanish.

"The most important thing, in our view, was getting into the schools," said Abbott. "We could have had a bike rodeo, but the people that come to those events already know about bike safety – we have to meet them where they are."

Visiting the schools allowed the leadership class to bring its program directly to the kids.

"Our goal is to reach the highest number of kids possible," said Abbott. "We've realized the more we do and the more we talk about bike safety, the more we have to do."

Dave Kimball, a board member of the Palmetto Cycling Coalition, has also been at the forefront of the bike safety issue in the Lowcountry area. The Palmetto Cycling Coalition is a statewide bicycling advocacy group, and Kimball represents Beaufort, Jasper, Hampton and Colleton Counties. Through this group's efforts, "Share the Road" signs are posted throughout Beaufort, Jasper, and Hampton Counties.

Now Kimball is focusing on safety in the growing Sun City community. He is a member of the Sun City Cyclers, a biking club that organizes rides inside Sun City, around the Lowcountry, and throughout the southeast, and he's heading up its special safety task force. This newly formed committee met for the first time in April, and plans to review the bike safety situation in Sun City then work to educate residents and leaders on the basics. Sun City has grown significantly in the years since Kimball has lived there, and they will take this into consideration when they assemble their strategy.

"We'll be looking at growth, looking at what's currently on the books, and just making sure we're all on the same page," said Kimball. He cited the League of American Bicyclists' five criteria for a bike-friendly community as a good model for Sun City.

"They are engineering, education, encouragement, enforcement, and evaluation and planning," said Kimball. "Using that as a guideline for Sun City, I think we'll be just fine."

HITTING THE ROAD

Hilton Head has a number of active bicycle clubs that cater to a variety of experience levels, from slow-paced social riders to fast-paced avid cyclists. Kickin' Asphalt, the island's newest bike club, took its first ride in September of 2006 and already has about 80 members.

"We've been members of the Coastal Bicycle Touring Club in Savannah for a while and we felt like there was a need for something similar in this growing area," said the club's founder and president, Ron Knight, who described Kickin' Asphalt as a middle-ground club between the fast-paced avid cyclists and the slower social riders.

"We're not just a super fast group that most people can't join," said Knight. The Kickin' Asphalt group plans rides ranging from 20 to 40 miles long, and the leader rides at 15 or 16 miles per hour. Not everyone goes that fast, and riders are welcome to go at their own pace, explained Knight, who is an experienced cyclist. He and his wife, Beverly Perfect, have ridden their bikes

