

Here's how Massachusetts plans to be more bike-friendly

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The draft of a new state plan shows an emphasis on improving safety and accessibility from officials aiming to get more cyclists on the roads.



–Lane Turner/Globe Staff

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Massachusetts is looking to get more bicycles on its streets by focusing on building a better network of pathways and making biking safer, according to a plan by state officials.

The draft [“Massachusetts Bicycle Transportation Plan,”](#) the state Department of Transportation’s first that’s geared toward bicycling in 10 years, lays out how the Bay State can boost ridership amid an already growing number of cyclists as bike-share options and other changes have increased the number of two-wheel riders in recent years.

“It was absolutely time to update the bicycle plan especially when you consider the huge leap in bike ridership in the past decade,” Pete Sutton, a bicycle and pedestrian program coordinator for MassDOT, told Boston.com recently.

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But there's still work to be done, officials say.

Just over half, or 52 percent, of all trips in Massachusetts are three miles or less. But despite how close the destinations are, 80 percent of those trips are made using automobiles, according to the draft plan.

There's potential for more people to become everyday bicyclists — and curb greenhouse gas emissions from cars and trucks at the same time — if the state can make biking safer and more convenient, according to the plan.

“For decades, the percentage of people who ride a bike to work has remained low,” Secretary of Transportation Stephanie Pollack wrote in the report. “This is a statistic that we need to start to change in order to meet our goals for reducing congestion and greenhouse gas emissions and improving public and community health.”

The renewed focus for MassDOT centers on making sure bike transportation is treated the same way as all other modes are — including vehicles, whose prioritization skewed land use and other decisions away from cycling for decades — in planning and design processes, the plan outlines.

The vision also emphasizes installing comfort and safety measures for cyclists onto the Commonwealth's streets, such as designated and detached bike lanes and other kinds of roadside pathways.

The farther a bike route is from vehicle traffic, the more likely it is to attract bicyclists, particularly groups of friends and families riding together, the report indicates.

MassDOT has incorporated those design and safety elements into its maintenance projects over the years, although those changes were often made when roadways or other infrastructure required repairs, according to Jackie DeWolfe, the department's director of sustainability.

The goal moving forward is to make these upgrades more proactively, she said in an interview.

There's high demand for new projects centered around biking and walking these days, too, Sutton said.

“The public can't get enough of them,” he said. “We can't build them fast enough.”

Through its 2019-2023 capital investment plan, MassDOT has \$60 million to cover the rollout of its bike and pedestrian transportation initiatives.

Additional money will come through several other already existing state programs and Chapter 90 money, used to reimburse cities and towns for expenses on roadway and bikeway construction projects.

Municipal partners will be key in seeing the bike plan through, according to officials.

Partnerships between the state and municipalities are needed in order to get things done — namely, building a better, more connected network of bike routes and pathways, according to the plan.

Local roadways owned by cities and towns — which make up 81 percent of streets in the state — have the highest chances of motivating more people to get pedaling on a daily basis.

While there have been a growing number of bike routes sprouting up in communities all over, the “high comfort” trails — routes built to accommodate cyclists of varying ages and abilities — are disconnected from one another. The divide currently makes these pathways unlikely to appeal to everyday cyclists, the plan says.

Additionally, gaps and boundaries in the system come in several other forms, including poor route maintenance and snow removal, dark pathways, and a lack of connectivity to mass transit options, the plan says.

“When well-connected, biking and transit are highly complementary travel modes,” the plan states. “People living too far to conveniently walk to transit may still be within a quick bike ride to a station or stop, closing the ‘first and last mile gap’ and expanding the number of households that can access transit. Providing the option to bike to transit can encourage ridership growth while simultaneously managing both congestion and demand for additional parking.”