

Features

10 Years of Change: The evolution of Detroit's non-motorized transportation network

AARON MONDRY | TUESDAY, JULY 21, 2015



Detroit is and always will be the Motor City, but it has shown in recent years that it has plenty of room for other modes of transportation.

A decade ago, Detroit hardly had any bike lanes and lacked most other features of a non-motorized transportation system. The term greenway was foreign to most Detroiters save for a handful of planners and funders with big plans for new paths along the Detroit River and derelict railroad rights of way.

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Since then, however, the number of non-motorized transit options has increased significantly in the city thanks to transit advocacy groups and willing partners in city and state government. Today there are over 170 miles of bike lanes throughout the city of Detroit.

Advocates say non-motorized transportation infrastructure should be a major priority for governments everywhere.

"There's so many reasons why this is an important issue," says [Todd Scott](#), executive director for the [Detroit Greenway Coalition](#), an organization that promotes the development of greenways and the use of bicycles. He touts benefits to low income residents, who have difficulty affording automobiles and high local insurance costs. Then there are the health benefits. In a city that suffers from high rates of diabetes and cardiovascular disease, investing in walking and cycling infrastructure could have a huge effect on improving the public health and reducing healthcare costs.

This is one of many social and economic arguments in favor of emphasizing non-motorized transit, says Scott Klein, president and partner at [Giffels Webster](#), a civil engineering firm that's worked on numerous non-motorized transit projects in the city.

"Study after study has shown that proper design of bike provisions stimulates economic development, increases retail sales, and increases home values," he says. "It just makes too much sense not to emphasize it, particularly when the cost of implementation is so low."

Thomas Woiwode, director of the Greenways Initiative for the [Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan](#), explains how this process happens.

"Non-motorized transit changes the feel of the urban landscape," he says. "You interact with your environment in a very different way than when you're driving 60 miles per hour in an enclosed environment where you don't have any opportunity to engage your surroundings. Putting feet on the street has been shown to be a way of reducing crime, of increasing traffic into commercial areas, of transforming the social and cultural dynamic."

Ripe for non-motorized infrastructure

While they are not often recognized as assets, Detroit has many elements that make it an ideal city for the implementation of a dynamic non-motorized transportation system. Underutilized infrastructure like abandoned rail lines and wide, over-built roads are excellent candidates to be repurposed or modified for non-motorized uses.

"We would never build roads like that today," Clein says, referring to Detroit's many excessively wide surface streets. But these roads, especially the spokes issuing from downtown (Fort, Michigan, Grand River Avenue, Woodward, Gratiot, and Jefferson), which are in some cases nine lanes wide, have ample room for automobiles, parking, and bike lanes.

Scott concurs with Clein's assessment. "Not only are we blessed with extremely wide roads," he says, "but we're also a flat city. If you've ever lived in San Francisco, you know what an advantage that is."

Detroit also has the potential for the development of an extensive network of greenways, typically defined as pathways set apart from main roads that incorporate the environment. The Dequindre Cut, a converted section of a Grand Trunk Railroad line that which will soon directly feed into Eastern Market, is the most prominent example in the city to date.

More non-motorized transit projects are underway. Land for the [Inner Circle Greenway](#) is currently being assembled and will connect existing and future paths into a 26-mile loop around Detroit that crosses into Dearborn, Highland Park, and Hamtramck. Streetscaping along a section of East Jefferson Avenue will include the [first protected bike lanes](#) in Southeast Michigan. Cass Avenue will become an alternate route for cyclists looking to avoid potential hazards along Woodward's M-1 Rail streetcar line. The plan calls for buffered bike lanes all the way from Grand Boulevard to Cobo Hall, repair stations, and in-ground counters, which will tally how many people bike past a certain point.

A growing bike culture

Between Slow Roll, Critical Mass, Tour de Troit, and other bike events involving sometimes thousands of cyclists, Detroit has seen an undeniable growth in bike culture.

"Every study done over last decade, and also a non-scientific study of my two sons, shows that younger generations express interest in bikeable, walkable communities," says Woiwode. "They have a very different psychological profile from my generation. And because of that, they want to see infrastructure that complements their interests."

Governments have taken notice as well. With the cooperation of the Michigan Department of Transportation, which owns Detroit's main spokes and has final input on any alterations, bike lanes have been installed across many miles of road in Midtown, Corktown, Southwest, and other neighborhoods. The city of Detroit has instituted these changes in accordance with the Non-Motorized Transit Plan, drafted by Giffels Webster and approved by a unanimous vote of the Detroit City Council in 2006.

"Administrations of local municipalities are critically important in realizing these benefits," says Woiwode. In many cases, federal grants earmarked for alternative transit requires matching funds from local governments. According to Woiwode, Clein, and Scott, the Duggan administration has been a receptive and willing partner in instituting these improvements.

Given these trends and the slate of future projects, Detroit could, in fact, become a national player in non-motorized transit. "I would not bet against Detroit in this department," says Scott. "We got a late start compared to other cities, but we've leapfrogged many and will continue to do so."

This story is a part of "10 Years of Change," a series celebrating Model D's decade of publishing in Detroit and the transformations that have occurred in the city over that period. Read other stories in the series [here](#).

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