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Taking back the streets one bicycle at a time

Posted by **KAREN DYBIS** Wednesday, September 23, 2009 at 11:59 am

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In Detroit, there are cars. And then there is something known as “non-motorized transportation.”

That means bicycles, y'all.

Believe it or not, people in the Car Capital of the World love their bikes. And there is a huge movement to create a culture here that is friendlier to two wheels than four.

One such project would develop about 400 miles of bicycle lanes throughout Detroit. All it would take is some paint, new signs and a little cash, said Scott Clein, who heads the Detroit office of Giffels-Webster Engineers.

The firm, along with other key partners, mapped out every one of those miles with the city's cooperation and a Michigan Department of Transportation grant. Clein and a support staff spent 18 months on the project, studying Detroit and trying to connect its waterways, landmarks and neighborhoods.

These paths have the potential to draw the creative class – artists, singletons and young couples – to the city, Clein said. It also might improve our collective health (Detroit typically ranks as the Top 10 or 2 on obesity lists).

“Bikes are all about freedom. It's about access. And that's what makes a city great,” Clein said.

Detroit has the room for cyclists, Clein argues. Its major roads, like Michigan Avenue, have a stunning nine lanes. That is because the city once had cable cars and modes of

transportation that needed space. Plus, Detroit used to have more than 2 million residents filling its 140 square miles.

Today, the population is around 900,000. Traffic is minimal on some roadways. And there is a growing number of people across Detroit that want places to walk, bike, skate and blade across.

Plus, if Detroit wants to become the next Portland, it needs to be more feet friendly, Clein said.

The city adopted the NonMotorized Master Plan a year ago. But putting it into effect takes money, something the city cannot spare.

There is hope at the grassroots level. Over the past weekend, an estimated 2,000 cyclists came to the city for the 8th annual Tour De Troit – nearly double the number that showed up last year. Its goal is in part is to raise funds for the Corktown-Mexicantown Greenlink, which could link these key communities to the Detroit riverfront.

One great example already exists. The Dequindre Cut Greenway, an urban recreational path, officially opened in May. The 1.2-mile greenway, developed through a public, nonprofit and private partnership, offers a pedestrian link between the Riverfront, Eastern Market and many of the adjacent residential neighborhoods. Formerly a Grand Truck Railroad line, the Dequindre Cut is a below-street level path that features a 20-foot-wide paved pathway, which includes separate lanes for pedestrian and bicycle or rollerblading traffic.

I'm convinced the bike paths will happen. But if you're on the fence, consider this: Each year, Metro Detroit's commuters spend more than 50 hours sitting in traffic, wasting 34 gallons of gasoline per person.

Time to strap on a helmet and ride.

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- *karen248*, September 23, 2009 at 1:35 pm

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This is awesome. OK, so it's not public transportation which Detroit desperately needs, but it's a step in the right direction. I'm one of those suburbanites who doesn't pay much attention to our dying city, so I had no idea this was going on. Thanks for sharing this.