

SUSTAINABLE MARBLEHEAD: Safer biking in Marblehead

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I have enjoyed riding a bicycle for as long as I can remember and for many years feel fortunate to have lived and bicycled in town. My riding enjoyment and that of so many others is not hard to understand—it aligns closely with what we all know and love about Marblehead. We live in a scenic community that includes hundreds of years of history along our streets and alleys and rugged New England coastline along our shores. It is big enough to be able to take a nice ride without having to leave town (one lap around town including the Neck is about thirteen miles) and small enough to get where you need to go easily, maybe to Crosby's or Devereux Beach.

The terrain is user friendly, mostly flat with modest inclines, but with some exceptions like the Cliffs neighborhood and Beacon Street. Even without any markings for cyclists, most of our streets outside of the historic and retail districts are wide and safe enough for two-wheelers. Those other streets present a number of difficult challenges; we try to be extra cautious and make do. And we have a friendly, full service bike shop in town.

Over the past several years I have become a frequent bicycle rider in a different coastal community, Venice, Fla., which has a number of similarities to our town. It is about the same size with a population of 22,000 including a small shopping district. It enjoys scenic views along the Gulf Coast and Intracoastal Waterway. And it boasts a historic district, included in the US National Register of Historic Places, dating all the way back to 1926.

But viewed from the bicycle seat, Venice is very different from Marblehead. It has earned designation as a "Bicycle Friendly Community," Silver Level, from the League of American Bicyclists, a national bicycle advocacy group. This was

accomplished over a number of years by a small and dedicated group of local bicycle enthusiasts and community-spirited individuals. Partnering with the city, they slowly and steadily implemented improvements for cycling safety and comfort.

Many of them are in plain sight like paved multi-use (walking and biking) trails through parks and along a former railroad right of way, dedicated bicycle lanes and shared bicycle lane markings (sharrows) on busier streets. Ample bicycle racks are located throughout town at parks, beaches, playgrounds, the retail district and more. It's not unusual to find them full.

A particularly helpful aid is a legible, color-coded bicycle map showing the numerous bicycle lanes and routes in town including streets to avoid and a recommended 12-mile loop using primarily multi-use trails and less congested side streets. Featured on the backside are important safety information and local bicycle laws.

Although less obvious than infrastructure improvements, the amount of education and encouragement offered within the community is integral to promoting the mission of safety and comfort. Two bicycle shops operate within the city and there are at least four active area clubs that support bicycling, walking and the trails. The clubs offer a number of group rides each week for every level of rider. Even the city sponsors a monthly ride to reach out to novice riders and set an expectation to the community that riders on the streets are normal and welcome. Training classes are offered by the clubs and include bicycle safety, riding skills, maintenance and repair. One of the clubs presents bicycle safety programs at area schools. Another club partners with the city to help plan and implement the different bicycling and walking programs. Much has been accomplished and the effort to improve continues.

As enjoyable as it is to ride around the Neck on an early summer day, bicycling in Marblehead can be, and needs to be, better. The motivation to act is to improve the riding environment, primarily safety and comfort, for the sizable number of current and future riders in town including our children. Many changes intended for the bicycle rider will benefit automobile drivers and pedestrians too. Communities that have made these types of changes also experience improved health, less congestion, greater attraction for residents and visitors, and

economic benefits.

Nationwide, Massachusetts is ranked as the number four Bike Friendly State by the League of American Bicyclists. While Marblehead has a long way to become a silver level Bicycle Friendly Community, the new and growing Sustainable Marblehead organization is tackling this and other issues to create and maintain a more healthy, sustainable and resilient community. If you are interested in learning more, please contact us at sustainablemarblehead@gmail.com or www.sustainablemarblehead.org.