

City wins silver for attention to bikes

But heavy traffic and a lack of bicycle lanes are "barriers to entry."

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As the city celebrated its national recognition as a "bicycle-friendly" community Monday and looked to entice more people to bike to and fro on a regular basis, even bike enthusiasts said they believe it's still too dangerous a proposition for most people to get on the roads alongside zipping cars and bearing-down SUVs.

After arriving at City Hall on bicycle Monday night, City Commissioner-elect Randy Wells said living in the Duck Pond neighborhood affords him the ability to bike to most everywhere he needs to get.

But a lot of Gainesville residents face "barriers to entry" when it comes to biking, Wells said, pointing to safety, the layout of some roadways and the proximity between housing and destinations like grocery stores.

Improving bicycle infrastructure, he said, could encourage people to live closer to the heart of downtown, sparking infill downtown and thus making it easier to bike to work, cutting down on greenhouse emissions.

"It sounds kind of like a panacea," admitted Wells, a former chairman of the city's Bicycle/Pedestrian Advisory Board.

At a news conference Monday afternoon announcing recent bicycling designations for Gainesville, Wells and Mayor Pegeen Hanrahan spoke of the challenges of getting people to trade in cars for bikes.

"Certainly, in-lane biking is not for everyone. It can be very intimidating, and we want to meet people where they're comfortable," Hanrahan said. "When you don't have those several thousand pounds of steel around you as you do in an automobile, any small mistake on the part of the bicyclist or the driver can be tragic."

She spoke from experience.

"If you've ever had a friend lost in a bicycle or pedestrian accident, as I have, you understand the importance and how invaluable that work is," she said.

While an undergraduate at the University of Florida, her friend John M. Stirna III was killed on a bicycle, she said afterward.

In 2008, four people in Alachua County were killed in bicycle accidents, and the year before, five were killed, according to the Florida Department of Highway Safety

and Motor Vehicles.

Talking about the city's new program to monitor the number of drivers yielding to pedestrians, she said critics of that program should understand "the same basic driver behaviors that make walking unsafe make biking unsafe."

Dekova Batey, the bicycle and pedestrian coordinator for the city's Public Works Department, said the city now has about 250 miles of bike lanes, up from 230 in 2001.

But bike lanes aren't the only way to increase the number of riders.

The advisory board is advocating for a 10-foot-wide off-road lane along Northwest 16th Avenue, similar to the trail along Archer Road south of campus.

As it stands, Gainesville is considered a "silver-level" biking city by the League of American Bicyclists - one of only five Florida cities recognized by the organization - and was recently ranked No. 16 among the Top 50 cycling cities in the U.S. by Bicycling Magazine.

Still, Wells, who will take his spot on the City Commission Thursday, said the city could do more to make it more bike-accessible. Whether it can from a fiscal perspective remains to be seen.

"We'd like to go for gold," he said, later adding, "No matter what, there are the restrictions of cost."

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