



PUSH FOR PLATINUM

Tucson's Push for Platinum and Recognition at the National Bike Summit

Editor's Note: This is the first in a series Tail Winds will publish as it tracks the Tucson-Pima County effort to achieve platinum status as a Bicycle Friendly Community in 2012.

Since 2006, "Tucson, Arizona and the Eastern Pima County Region" (TEPCR) has enjoyed gold-level status as a Bicycle Friendly Community, as designated by the Washington, DC-based League of American Bicyclists (LAB). But Tucson's many bicycling advocates and enthusiasts have long held the conviction that this nationally-renowned bicycling Mecca deserves the highest designation: platinum. This year, a "Platinum Taskforce" will work to achieve that goal for the region.

With more than 20 members and growing, the Platinum Taskforce is composed primarily of local bicycle advocates, organizers, and transportation officials representing several jurisdictions including the City of Tucson, Pima County, the Arizona Department of Transportation, Oro Valley, Marana, Sahuarita, and the Pima Association of Governments (PAG), which is overseeing the application process. The deadline for the Bicycle Friendly Community application to LAB is February 2012.

Ann Chanecka, Senior Transportation Planner of PAG, is the main coordinator of the Platinum Taskforce.

"I'll be the one pushing people along and making sure I get all the information I need," Chanecka said. Different taskforce members will focus on different sections of the application, and Chanecka will pull it all together. PAG will submit it on behalf of the TEPCR, hereafter referred to as the "Tucson Region."

"One challenge the Taskforce has discussed," Chanecka explained, "is that the application is really geared toward a single jurisdiction, whereas we are applying as a region represented by several jurisdictions." Tucson is one of the few bicycle friendly communities to be recognized as a region.

In Elite Company

Platinum status is currently enjoyed by only three American cities: Boulder, CO; Davis, CA; and Portland, OR. The Tucson Region shares gold status with nine other cities; 28 are ranked silver; and 117 are bronze, for a total of 158 communities currently recognized as bicycle friendly at the bronze level or higher. More than 400 American cities have applied for designation since LAB's program began in 2003.

Tucson's rise to the highest ranks of bicycle friendly status has been fast and furious. The city first applied as a single jurisdiction in 2004, and was awarded silver. But the celebration was short-lived, as bicycle advocates and officials quickly realized that higher rankings were within reach if the next Tucson application extended beyond the city boundaries. Therefore, a regional application was submitted in 2006, and the Tucson Region rose to gold.

Heady with the prospects of a seemingly rapid ascent to platinum, the Tucson Region re-applied just two years

later, in 2008, two years before its gold status was to expire (Bicycle Friendly Community designations are good for four years after each application). But LAB responded by keeping gold status for the Tucson Region. Among other recommendations, LAB advised that increasing bicycle ridership was "perhaps the biggest single thing to focus on" in its May 2008 feedback report. LAB also advised taking more time to reapply: "The next step up to platinum is and should remain, we believe, a real challenge and a large step that will realistically take some more time to accomplish." The Tucson Region heeded LAB's advice on both fronts.

Recent developments have focused on increasing ridership. These include last year's establishment of the Living Streets Alliance advocacy group, and the introduction of Cyclovia Tucson, which held its second annual event March 27. The previous week, the Tucson City Council passed a new parking code that accommodated bicycle advocates' concerns for safer and more convenient bike parking near city storefronts.

Platinum Taskforce members meet monthly, and sub-committees have formed to address each of the "Five Es" - Engineering, Education, Encouragement, Enforcement, and Evaluation & Planning - that constitute the main categories in which LAB judges every Bicycle Friendly Community application. Subsequent articles in this series will focus in-depth on each of the Five Es as the Platinum Taskforce takes them up.

Bicycle Summit-bound

As the work of the taskforce was getting underway, Chanecka and taskforce members saw the need for a Tucson presence in LAB's annual National Bike Summit, held March 8-10 in Washington, DC. Chanecka attended on behalf of PAG, but her airfare and registration expenses were covered by a grant from The Brad Fund, founded by taskforce member Jean Gorman. "Jean strongly believed that Tucson needed representation... and I so appreciate her support," Chanecka said.

The 2011 National Bike Summit hosted a record number of attendees, 767, composed of bicycle advocates and officials from across the country. They attended break-out sessions on various aspects of bicycle/pedestrian programming and funding, and heard keynote addresses by high-level officials including Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar, and Congressman Earl Blumenauer (D-OR), founder and co-chair of the Congressional Bike Caucus. Most importantly, summit attendees held over 400 meetings during Capitol Hill day, to lobby members of Congress and their staffs on the importance of supporting and continuing funding of bicycle/pedestrian programs in their respective districts.

"There was a remarkable level of energy and enthusiasm amongst the participants," said Andy Clarke, LAB President. "Even in a year when you would think people would be worried about their future." Indeed, since Republicans won control of the House of Representatives in the November 2010 mid-term elections,



Congressional Bike Ride participants hold mini Arizona flags in front of the U.S. Capitol.

talk of deep and wide federal budget-cutting overshadows all budget negotiations. As this article went to press, the timeframe for passage of a new federal transportation bill remained highly uncertain, and passage of the 2010 federal budget was on life support.

To date, funding levels for the main bicycle/pedestrian programs contained in the transportation bill - such as Safe Routes To School and Transportation Enhancements - have escaped major cuts. With guidance from LAB, summit attendees' lobbying efforts emphasized the cost-effective and job-creating aspects of bicycle/pedestrian programs. But the budget process remains a "moving target" that LAB tracks daily, according to Clarke.

A Special Mission

Chanecka had another important reason to attend the National Bike Summit, as Tucson and Southern Arizona were recognized in a special way. The Friday morning Congressional Bike Ride, which caps off the Bike Summit every year, was dedicated this year to Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and the other victims of the shooting in Tucson Jan. 8. The idea was first suggested by LAB board member John Siemiatkoski, and quickly embraced by LAB and Giffords' staff.

A record number of riders - more than 100 - turned out on the cold, windy morning of March 11. Riders gathered at Garfield Circle in front of the Capitol; after a moment of silence, they heard remarks by Chanecka, Andy Clarke, and Giffords congressional staff member, Ashley Nash-Hahn. Chanecka distributed two items to all of the riders: the black & white ribbons made by Homicide Survivors that were originally distributed at the January 12 memorial service in Tucson; and the blue "Peace Love Gabby" bracelets that support the Gabe Zimmerman Scholarship Fund. Perimeter Bicycling funded the bracelets for distribution to the riders.

In addition, Kristi Felts Moore of the Phoenix-based Arizona Bicycle Club distributed bandana-sized Arizona state flags, which riders proudly displayed for the group photo taken before the ride. The nine-mile bike route, courtesy of the Washington Area Bicyclist Association, showcased the new, segregated Pennsylvania Avenue bike lane, which occupies prime real estate down the middle of "America's Main Street" from Third Street to 15th Street, NW; the two-way bike lane on

the west side of 15th Street, NW; and the Metropolitan Branch Trail back to Capitol Hill.

The group was as jubilant as it was respectful of its purpose in riding that morning. "We were so honored to show our respects to Congresswoman Giffords and the other victims," said Clarke. "It was just the least we could do."

Next up: The Platinum Taskforce looks at Evaluation & Planning

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