



PUSH FOR PLATINUM

Encouragement: Building on Tucson's Bicycle Culture

Editor's Note: This is the third 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.

According to the League of American Bicyclists (LAB), a Bicycle Friendly Community “welcomes cyclists by providing safe accommodation for cycling and *encouraging people to bike for transportation and recreation.*” (Author's emphasis)

That “transportation” comes before “recreation” is no accident. Bicycling as a practical mode of transportation is what drives bicycle infrastructure funding and development, as well as the livable community ethos that the LAB champions. It translates into better health, a cleaner environment, and a higher quality of life, benefits that can accrue to all members of a community, whether or not they ride.

Recreational bicycling has long reigned in Tucson. But as it continues to grow as a major regional industry and activity, it is also helping to foster a broader and more inclusive bicycle culture. Longtime recreational cycling proponents are supporting increased cross-fertilization between themselves and bicycle commuting advocates.

All of that is leading to more and diverse bicycle encouragement activities in the region. At the same time, new developments in local advocacy are advancing increased bicycle use for short trips and practical purposes.

Fun in the Sun

The Tucson Region is frequently recognized nationally as a major bicycling hub. Last year, Outside magazine rated Tucson as Best for Road Biking in its “Best Towns” survey, and Bicycling magazine rated Tucson as a top-10 most bike-friendly city. This year, USA Today included Tucson in its “10 Great Places for City Cycling” feature.

Annual events like the University Medical Center El Tour de Tucson; Kona Bikes 24 Hours in the Old Pueblo; and the Mount Lemmon Hill Climb attract thousands of local and out-of-state participants. El Tour alone has been a game-changer. Poised to celebrate its

30th year in 2012, El Tour has grown steadily over the years to become one of the largest one-day perimeter events in the country, with upwards of 9000 cyclists. LAB's 2011 report, “Bicycle Friendly America: The Blueprint,” called El Tour “the catalyst for a lot of what happens to make the Tucson area above average for cyclists.”

Mountain biking is on an upswing and has become another major aspect of bicycling in the region. Trail facilities have grown significantly. “Our design is state-of-the-art, and sustainable,” said Mark Flint, Tail Winds Editor and Pima County trail designer. “We've added around 100 miles of trail in the past 10 years,” Flint added.

Epic Rides has been organizing mountain bike events for the past 13 years. “We've managed to grow between 10 and 20 percent every year,” said founder Todd Sadow. Its main event is the Kona Bikes 24 Hours in the Old Pueblo, which draws about 1800 riders and is the largest 24-hour mountain bike event in the country. All Epic Rides events raise money for charitable beneficiaries, including the Sonoran Desert Mountain Bicyclists (SDMB), a mountain biking and trail advocacy group.

“Working with land managers is a big part of our advocacy work,” said Zach MacDonald, past president and board member of SDMB, whose members help maintain and clean up trails. In a major coup, in May 2011 the group won a \$50,000 Ford grant through GOOD magazine's “Reinventing the Outdoors” contest. Part of the money will likely be used for trail work and to begin construction of an urban mountain bike skills park.

Most mountain bikers are also “roadies” and ride in road events as well. It may be a given, but the region's numerous bicycling clubs and organizers support each other – and advocacy efforts – in important ways. Take the Greater Arizona Bicycling Association (GABA) as one example. “GABA is supportive of El Tour and many of our members serve on El Tour's Bike Patrol,” said Jade Robinson, GABA board secretary.

In addition, GABA raises money for El Grupo Youth Cycling Club, performs bike repairs for children, promotes city



Cyclovia Tucson in April 2011. Omer Kreso Photo

and county bike safety classes, and, the biannual GABA Bike Swap draws thousands of bicyclists of all types looking for good deals. In 2010, the first annual Cyclovia Tucson coincided with the spring Bike Swap, which together drew about 10,000 participants.

Advocacy on the Rise

Tom Thivener, City of Tucson Bicycle & Pedestrian Program Manager, helped found Cyclovia Tucson. “You've never seen so many people engaged that are interested in biking, that normally don't get out on their bike,” Thivener said, “but they do for that day.” Indeed, an annual Cyclovia in Tucson is a major new encouragement activity, which bicycle advocates – like LAB's Andy Clarke – hail as extremely effective in getting more people on their bikes and riding in their community.

The second Cyclovia Tucson was held in March 2011 and was even more successful. Next year's event will be organized by the non-profit advocacy group, Living Streets Alliance (LSA), which was formed in early 2011. Emily Yetman, president of the board of LSA, characterized it as the “why” behind Cyclovia Tucson. In a June 2011 LAB blog post, Andy Clarke was quoted as saying that LSA “is breathing new life into that region's quest for ‘platinum’ BFC status... That's exciting to see.”

In addition to serving on LSA's board and as BICAS Outreach Co-Coordinator, Kylie Walzak saw a need to get more women on bikes. So in June 2011, she and a group of friends created the Tucson Bicycle Belles, an informal women's bicycling group whose mission is to create fun opportunities for women to ride bikes, and to educate themselves about bicycling at the same time. “Right now we only exist on Facebook,” Kylie said. But in its first month, almost 200 women visited the page, and 20-30 participated in each of the group's first three events.

Incentives and Information

Shortly after LSA's formation, it co-ordinated the annual Bike Fest, with assistance from City of Tucson, Pima County, and Pima Association of Governments (PAG). Bike Fest is a

“celebration of bicycling” and includes several events in April such as Bike 2 Work Week and the Bike Commuter Challenge.

To take the challenge, participants registered at PAG's Rideshare online database, and logged in the number of bicycle trips taken during the month. Those who logged 20 or more one-way bike trips could win prizes ranging from the grand prize, a Linus commuter bike, to gift cards from REI and other retailers. Three hundred six bicyclists took part in the challenge. They logged 6355 one-way bike trips, saving 51,197 vehicle miles and 39,729 pounds of greenhouse gases.

“Prizes work, and incentives work,” said Ruth Reiman, who manages PAG's Travel Reduction Program (TRP), in which major employers inform their employees about alternative transportation options on an annual basis. Several employers go beyond the minimum requirements to actively promote bicycling, car pooling, bus riding and other modes. Any employer/employee in the region can pursue similar activities through TRP's marketing arm, the Sun Rideshare program.

Individualized marketing efforts, such as Portland's Smart Trips, have made a huge difference in getting residents to change behaviors and use bicycle infrastructure that they were previously unaware of. This summer, the City of Tucson received grant money to do a one-year Smart Trips pilot program. It will target a city neighborhood that has good facilities but low ridership. Thivener is hoping the program will not only “change some habits” but also offer a vision to develop a broader Smart Trips program when more funding is available.

Finally, if knowledge is power, then the Tucson Region's bicycle community has become far more robust thanks to the excellent TucsonVelo.com. The news website and information clearinghouse was created in January 2010 by journalist and bicyclist, Michael McKisson. Tucson Velo publishes at least one original story every weekday, updates its “Link roundup” daily, and has an event calendar that McKisson hopes will become the main resource for events around town. “There is a movement happening in Tucson... that cycling can be more of an everyday part of your life,” McKisson said. He lives by that creed, and the community is all the better for it.



Omer Kreso Photo