

CYCLING

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marking lanes won't keep cyclists safer and will promote a false sense of security. Even so, Lee County commissioners are set this month to consider legislation that might require things like signs, such as those that ask motorists to "share the road," and other measures to make the county more bicycle friendly.

Maybe people would see more bicyclists out riding around, suggests Dan Moser, program manager for the Florida Bicycle Association, if county and city officials didn't treat them like "second-class citizens." Lee DOT currently follows the minimum requirements imposed by state guidelines, which don't require white lines or signage indicating a bicyclist is welcome.

Bill Nesper, director of the Bicycle Friendly America Program for the League of American Bicyclists, based in Washington, D.C., agrees with Mr. Moser.

"I think it's important to bring up that one-third of our population doesn't drive," he said.

Lee County's Bicycle/Pedestrian Advisory Committee applied this year to Mr. Nesper's organization, hoping to officially be approved as a Bicycle Friendly Community. But Lee County failed to achieve even the lowest level of friendliness. Only about one-third of the communities that apply qualify as a Bicycle Friendly Community.

"It didn't even get the lowest grade," said Mr. Moser. "It just confirmed what we all know, that we have a piss-poor bicycling environment."

Mr. Nesper wouldn't reveal where Lee County fell short. There are five categories considered — engineering, education, encouragement, enforcement and evaluation.

The lack of marked bicycle lanes may have hurt the county's chances. On Alico Road, for example, bicycle signs painted on the asphalt were blacked out. Steps like that could be construed as hostile to bicyclists, not friendly.

Mr. Nester suggested that retirees in Lee County and others would be out bicycling more if they were encouraged to do so. He cited a 2008 study by Rutgers University Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, which found that people 65 and older in the Netherlands, Denmark and Germany made more bicycle trips than any other age group except teenagers.

"It's not that the Dutch are born with some gene that makes them able to ride longer," he said. "They made real decisions to accommodate (bicyclists). And it's not a bunch of extra money. We're talking about simple things like putting up signage, putting up paint to let cyclists know they're allowed to be here, running public service announcements. Things like that don't cost a lot of extra money."

Lee County commissioners will discuss these and other plans starting this month as they follow the lead of federal legislation called The Complete Streets Act. It hasn't been voted on yet, but aims to create a "comprehensive, integrated, and connected network for all modes of transportation."

The commissioners hope to make Lee County "a complete streets county," when it comes to integrating walking and bicycling into our car-centric culture. But they've got a long way to go — and will need the compliance of cities like Cape Coral and Fort Myers. "Mean Streets" reports from a Washington, D.C.-based group consistently rank the Fort Myers-Cape Coral metropolitan area as one of the deadliest in the nation for pedestrians.

BikeWalk Lee, a local advocacy group that promotes Complete Street legislation, is hosting a public meeting in Lakes Park

Sunday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., called "Turning Lee County's Mean Streets into Complete Streets." Participants will trade ideas, comments and criticism from all sides of the issue. Lunch will be served.

Safety and respect

Older roads in Lee County weren't designed to accommodate bicycles at all. By the 1980s, a road was considered a "bicycle lane" if the outside lanes were simply wider than the standard lane width, said Andy Getch, Lee DOT senior engineer.

Lee County transportation planners stick by state guidelines, The Florida Greenbook, to guide their choices on how to accommodate bicyclists. The Greenbook lists both requirements and recommendations for bicycle lanes. And so far, Lee County has stuck with the requirements.

"Signing and marking bicycle lanes still falls into the 'should' category," Mr. Getch said.

Adding stripes and signs to shoulders also promotes a false sense of security, Mr. Wingard said.

"The bicyclist then has a certain perception that because they are in a bike lane that it gives them some protection against an automobile," he said. "But it gives them nothing. There's a white line (separating the cars from the bicyclists). I guess that's one of the reasons we've been a little bit hesitant to do anything."

Steve Jansen, Lee DOT's senior traffic engineer, agreed.

"Studies that I have seen have not shown that a marked bike lane is particularly safer than an unmarked bike lane," he said. "For bicycle safety probably the biggest thing that needs to be done is to educate bicyclists and drivers on sharing the roadway safely."

Mr. Moser insists signs and stripes, as well as building other infrastructure, don't cost as much as DOT leaders imply, if planned selectively. He argues that signs

and stripes do keep bicyclists safer, provided they are also educated on safely sharing the roadway with motorists.

"There's little excuse (for a bicyclists to ride the wrong way on a road) if you're in a lane and there's an arrow pointing in the other direction," he said. "There are these subtle things that make bike lanes safer."

And, he adds, this is about more than just safety. Like Rodney Dangerfield, bicyclists want some respect.

"A lot of it is symbolic," Mr. Moser said. "It's asking people to take (bicyclists and pedestrians) seriously. We're telling motorists, 'you're the king,' and everybody else is kind of second class."

Mr. Wingard might agree with that. "America is stuck in the automobile," he said. "We just have a fixation on driving our cars."

The political pressure in favor of motorists are hard to ignore, but there is also increasing pressure to accommodate new modes of transportation. While some measures like signing and striping might be low cost enough to get approval from commissioners, building new bicycle lanes could be a tougher sell.

"Anywhere you add pavement it costs to resurface later on, it costs to white it later on," said Don Scott, director of Lee Metropolitan Planning Organization. ■

if you go

>> **What:** "Turning Lee County's Mean Streets into Complete Streets"

>> **Where:** Lakes Park in South Fort Myers

>> **When:** 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 8.

>> **Details:** Drop in and share thoughts, complaints, suggestions and offers of assistance. Bike Walk Lee will supply maps, surveys and other tools for documenting ideas. Complimentary food and beverages will be provided to those who participate and volunteer.



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