

Boise's playing catch-up on bike and pedestrian paths

By: Teya Vitu March 7, 2017 0



Harris Ranch is following the lead of cities across the country with appealing multi-use paths separate from streets. Photo by Patrick Sweeney.

In just a few years, the American bike lane concept has matured beyond a hastily painted add-on at the edge of a road.

Now descriptions include protected, buffered, contraflow, shared-use, cycle tracks, separate bike paths and greenways. Minneapolis even calls its 4.3-mile Cedar Lake Trail and 5.5-mile Midtown Greenway bike freeways.

Biking and walking are what Ed McMahon at the Urban Land Institute regards as active transportation. McMahon spoke in Boise Feb. 8 at a ULI Idaho session about Active Transportation and Real Estate: The Value of Walking and Bicycling Amenities in Real Estate.

“What is the fastest growing mode of transportation in the U.S.? Bicycling. Nothing is even close,” said McMahon, a ULI senior fellow since 2004 in sustainable development.



Derick O'Neill

Derick O'Neill at the city of Boise's Planning & Development Services, Scott Schoenherr at Rafanelli & Nahas and Scot Oliver at Idaho Smart Growth are Boise executives who bicycle to work, along with many others up and down the corporate and small business ladder.

Bicycling in the Treasure Valley still accounts for just 1 percent of commuter traffic, though Boise does have 2.3 percent of its populace pedaling to work, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2015 American Commuter Survey. Even the nation's top bicycling big cities, Portland and Minneapolis, have only 7 and 5 percent bicycle commuters, contrasting with a national average of .6 percent.

"Why don't more people ride a bike?" McMahon asked. "It's not the topography, it's not the weather, it's not the culture. It is the fear of getting hit by a car."

Tyler Gilman, a Group One Sotheby's International Realty Realtor, who was a ULI active transportation panelist, knows a doctor who used to commute to downtown on his bike every day from the Hidden Springs development a few miles north of Boise.

"He described getting to the (Boise River) Greenbelt as mortal combat," said Gilman, who lives at and markets the 849-home Hidden Springs development. "He no longer commutes on a bike."

The Walk Score



Urban Land Institute's Ed McMahon told a group of 60 in Boise that bike paths lead to higher property values. Photo by Teya Vitu.

Many of the bicycling improvements of recent years also apply to pedestrians, as walkers and bikers often share the same space. But in the big picture, American rights-of-way largely still do not favor walkers, McMahon said.

"Hundreds of studies show that walkability increases home values. Every one-point increase in the Walk Score is a \$700 to \$3,000 increase in home value."

Yet "walking is difficult, dangerous and, in some cases, impossible," he said.

Walk Score, a private company founded in 2007, assigns a number from 1 to 100 to cities, neighborhoods, even individual addresses, to define a place's walkability to public amenities based on an algorithm that incorporates walking routes, depth of choice, pedestrian friendliness, population and neighborhood data.

Boise has a Walk Score of 39, which is described as “a car-dependent city” and a Bike Score of 63, described as “somewhat bikeable.” The North End has a Walk Score of 61 and Bike Score of 54. The Intermountain Multiple Listing Service, which is owned by the Boise Regional Realtors, has listed the Walk Score of each home listing since 2011.

Boise could be doing more

Boise could be doing much better at enabling bicycling, McMahon told the 60 people at the ULI event at the Eighth and Main tower in downtown Boise. Treasure Valley officials have taken steps to improve pedestrian and bicycling facilities, though many cities across America have created much more extensive systems of dedicated, motorized vehicle-free pathways for bikers and walkers.

Locally, governments and developers have responded. Ada County Highway District has installed 311 miles of bike lanes since the early 1990s, currently spending up to \$2 million a year on cycling facilities; Meridian has 33 miles of off-road, shared bike/pedestrian paths in place out of 130 planned miles; Nampa offers 12.5 miles of pathways and 4.7 miles of bike lanes. Caldwell has its 2.75-mile Centennial Greenbelt on the Boise River among its 7 miles of pathways in addition to 12.5 miles of bike lanes, and the Hidden Springs and Harris Ranch developments consciously incorporate active transportation elements into their housing projects as they are built.



You can bicycle from Sun Valley to Bellevue on the Wood River Trail. Photo by Teya Vitu.

Elsewhere in Idaho, Twin Falls built a 9.6-mile Canyon Rim Trail, 4 miles of dedicated bike routes on city streets and 13 miles of off-street multi-use paths. Sun Valley has the 32-mile paved multi-use Wood River Trail between Sun Valley and Bellevue that was developed from 1984 to 1992 and repaved in 2014-15. Idaho Falls has 26 miles of bike paths on its River Walk (formerly known as the Snake River Greenbelt) and Sunnyside Road but so far only 6.1 miles of on-street bike lanes.

Ada County has nearly as many bike lane miles as Portland’s 350 miles, 85 of those miles off-street and 77 miles neighborhood greenways, and more than Minneapolis’ 225 miles, 97 of those miles on off-road bikeways. Portland spent \$60 million on its bikeway network and Minneapolis

spent \$36 million just on its 5.5-mile Midtown Greenway that run nearly across the entire city on a former rail right-of-way just north of the city's major commercial Lake Street corridor.



Tom Laws

Those cities gain the acclaim, especially for the 13 multi-family housing complexes expressly built next the Midtown Greenway and Portland's recent opening of the largest car-free bridge in the United States with two 14-foot protected paths across the Willamette River.

"Give us a few years and we will be there," said Tom Laws, associate planner and bicycle and pedestrian planning coordinator at Community Planning Association for Southwest Idaho (COMPASS). "They have had more years to mature and define their networks."

Boise has had its famed Greenbelt since the late 1960s and bike lanes have been added to Ada County city streets for 25 years. But what if you live near Ustick and Eagle Road or anywhere not near State Street or Warm Springs Road? Boise's non-motorized pathways have primarily focused on the Greenbelt, Ridge to Rivers and the Indian Creek pathway and greenbelt in Nampa and Caldwell.

Laws notes that the Minneapolis and Portland metropolitan areas have more than five and three times the population of the Boise metro.

"With that additional population comes increased congestion, which can make public transportation and active transportation options more attractive," Laws said. "Additionally, that increased population also means an increased tax-base, providing additional resources for larger areas to focus on alternative modes."

COMPASS, the Boise metropolitan transportation planning agency, established an active transportation work group in 2015 to plan for the growing public interest in bicycling and walking.

"For a city of our size and how long we've invested in it, we are ahead of the game," Laws said. "We are really going above and beyond a lot of communities our size."

Traffic laws and enforcement are key

The Boise area has the bike lane mileage to match up with cities that get wider bike acclaim. But the Treasure Valley is better known as a place to take your life in your hands, even in designated bike lanes.

“The mileage is just one component of it,” Laws said. “Enforcement comes to mind. Other states have different rules and regulations to protect bicyclists and pedestrians. There are ‘vulnerable user’ laws to protect bikes. There are ‘safe passing’ laws that give a certain amount of feet (between car and bicyclist).”

Boise and Ada County are regarded as silver level bicycle friendly communities by the League of American Bicyclists. Boise State University is one of 14 universities to reach gold level bicycle friendly in the university category. Platinum is the highest level.

Boise and Ada County fall short of gold status particularly in the area of how many roads have bicycle lanes. Ada County has bike lanes on 33 percent of roads with average gold status at 60 percent for counties, and Boise’s bike network miles covers 26 percent of all roads with city average gold at 43 percent, according to the league.

Where Idaho does stand out is with bicyclists legally allowed to ride bikes on sidewalks and with the so-called Idaho Stop, where bicyclists can roll through stop signs if traffic is clear and cross on red lights if no traffic is coming.

“We have other states looking at that and they are really jealous,” Laws said.

Bike lanes as an economic development tool

Bike/pedestrian paths have become an economic development tools, much the way streetcars and freeways are. From the 1950s on, freeways attracted commercial and residential development. In the past 10-15, streetcar projects have become a prime ticket for developers. Subways and light rail are important tools as well.

Now in the 2010s, apartment and other housing projects are sprouting alongside multi-use bike and pedestrian paths and developers are consciously incorporating such paths into their projects. Thirteen apartment complexes followed Minneapolis’ Midtown Greenway, McMahan said. In Idaho, Meridian has embraced this concept. Developers are collaborating with the city on creating a 133-mile pathway network. Developers have paid for and built 73 percent of the first 33 miles of multi-use paths in place, said Jay Gibbons, project manager of Meridian’s Parks & Pathways.

McMahan said Hilton Head, S.C., synonymous for decades for golf and beaches, now has five times as many people riding bikes than golfing. The new 154-unit Bici Flats in Des Moines, Iowa prominently promotes itself as “situated at the convergence of three major regional bicycle trails.” Silver Moon Lodge, a 151-unit workforce housing project, has only 23 parking spaces but includes bike storage and a bike repair shop.

“No cars are allowed in the Grow Community on Bainbridge Island (near Seattle),” McMahan said. “They sold out all units in six months. They did no advertising and half the buyers are from out of state.”

Harris Ranch on Boise’s southeast side by no means restricts cars, but since development of the first 400 homes started in 1997-98 and a second 400 homes since 2006-07, bicycling and

walking have been an active, though not extensive component, said Doug Fowler, president of LeNir Ltd., the project manager of Harris Ranch development.



Doug Fowler

“I can tell you we’re developing 93 lots this year and they are all sold,” Fowler said. “What we hear over and over and over is ‘We can get on the Greenbelt in a five-minute bike ride from our house.’”

The Boise River Greenbelt is the Treasure Valley’s trump card. The busiest segment of the Greenbelt – the Friendship Bridge joining Julia Davis Park and Boise State University – had 562,184 pedestrian and 319,307 bicycle users, Laws said.

The Greenbelt is nature-oriented, unlikely to prompt the construction of tall office and apartment complexes. The Greenbelt runs between Harris Ranch and Eagle, with isolated segments in Star and Caldwell.

“You’re starting to see more connectivity to the Greenbelt,” said Laws, citing Eighth Street in Boise with its bike friendliness and push button signal for bicyclists at River Street. There is also the bike/ped Pioneer Corridor built by the Capital City Development Corp. between Myrtle Street and the Greenbelt, and the Ada County Highway District in 2018 plans to make Leadville Avenue a more bicycle-friendly alternative to Broadway to reach the Greenbelt.

Meridian partners with developers to build bike paths



The Diane and Winston Moore Memorial Pathway is among 33 miles of multi-use paths in place for bicyclists and pedestrians in Meridian. Photo courtesy of city of Meridian.

Some cities have spent millions of dollars on paths for bicyclists and pedestrians. Meridian has largely relied on housing developers to fund and build and homeowners associations to maintain its burgeoning bike and pedestrian path network.

So far, Meridian has paid for and maintains just 27 percent of the 33 existing path miles of the 133 miles of projected off-street pathways. In the past 10 years, sporadic multi-use, non-motorized path construction has produced a sporadic, fragmentary path network.

Nobody has tallied the cost of those 33 miles, but public and private sources say a multi-use path costs about \$30 a foot or roughly \$5.2 million for the existing network.

“Our plan is to loop the city and bisect that three times,” said Jay Gibbons, project manager for Meridian’s Parks & Pathways.



Jay Gibbons

Today’s network is a couple dozen fragments, largely based on individual developers building bike paths across their projects. But the city has a pathway map with solid and dotted lines indicating existing and future paths that creates Gibbons’ loop and three bisections.

The three bisections would be the railroad corridor, Five Mile Creek and Ten Mile Creek that the city itself is building and maintaining. The Five Mile Creek already has a few miles in service that will become a 4.5-mile continuous stretch once two short gap segments are completed this year, Gibbons said.

The longest continuous path so far is a 6-mile stretch between Chinden and McMillan, running east-west from Locust Grove to Ten Mile Road.

“Every bit of those 6 miles was built by the development community,” Gibbons said.

The central section runs through the square-mile Paramount subdivision, where Brighton Corp. has built about 1,000 homes, an elementary school, Rocky Mountain High School, a Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the 20-acre Paramount Marketplace – and about 3 miles of multi-use pathway.

“They are not cheap,” Brighton CEO David Turnbull said, calculating that a path costs \$75 a foot with landscaping. But “it increases the overall attractiveness of the community.”

Turnbull, however, questions the “active transportation” moniker that denotes bike paths and bike lanes serving as commuter routes for shopping or going to work, at least at Paramount. “It’s more of a lifestyle type of thing rather than active transportation,” Turnbull said. “Those pathways are heavily used internally for jogging and meeting up with neighbors.”

Brighton willingly followed the city master plan denoting multi-use paths, Turnbull said. The Paramount subdivision has components that meet the tenets of Ed McMahan, an Urban Land Institute senior resident fellow who recently spoke in Boise about active transportation. “Successful suburbs of the future will be those with walkable, mixed-use elements,” McMahan said.

The Treasure Valley’s agricultural legacy pays dividends for Meridian’s bikeway system as most of the existing paths and planned routes follow ditches, drainages and irrigation canals. Also, as a very new “bigger” city, Meridian can build off-street paths into its city at the outset rather than having to retrofit bike lanes and sidewalks into 100- and 150-year-old street networks, Gibbons said.

“We are answering what our residents are starting to ask for as far as pedestrian and bike paths go,” he said. “They’ve been to places where they do have them and they want them here. We have the opportunity to do them early on (in the city’s development).”

Harris Ranch strives to improve biking, walking opportunities



Harris Ranch has a variety of options that are ideal for pedestrians and bicyclists. Photo by Patrick Sweeney.

Harris Ranch will open a 2-mile gravel pathway for bikes and walkers in spring that doesn't cross any roads to get people under their own power from Council Springs Road to Highland Valley Road.

The 1,300-acre master-planned community on Boise's southeast side has always been served by the east end of the Boise River Greenbelt. There is also the Dallas Harris Legacy Riverwalk. Harris Ranch embraces the prevalent new urban designs with wider sidewalks, bike lanes and sidewalk bulbs at intersections to make the street narrow. Fowler said walkability was in play when the first 400 homes were built at Harris Ranch in 1997-98 but there is a stronger emphasis on such amenities, such as the 6-foot-wide sidewalks that are standard now.

Doug Fowler is president of LeNir Ltd., the project manager for development Harris Ranch since 2005. When he came on board a dozen years ago, a master plan was in place.

"The master plan was perfect at the time and we perfected it three or four times since then," Fowler said. "There are cultural shifts, political shifts, new information."

One source of new information is the Walk Score, which assigns a number from 1 to 100 to cities, neighborhoods, even individual addresses, to define a place's walkability to public amenities. Harris Ranch has a dismal Walk Score of 8 and a better Bike Score of 54. Fowler does not dispute this finding.

"It'll get better as we get more commercial and retail," Fowler said. "We have the infrastructure but you need to have a place to go."

Along with walking and biking, bus service has also been on Fowler's mind since the beginning. Valley Regional Transit in August 2014 launched Route 18 with three round trips in the morning and three roundtrips in the evening, VRT spokesman Mark Carnopis said.

You can walk or bike your kid to school in Hidden Springs

Bus service has not made it out to the 849-home Hidden Springs development north and east of Highway 55 and Hill Road. This is seen as the one missing element among the quartet of

pedestrian mobility, bicycle usage, complete streets and public transit that have been implemented there, said Tyler Gilman, a marketing specialist Realtor at Group One Sotheby's International Realty, which markets Hidden Springs.

Valley Regional Transit has no plans for a Hidden Springs route at this time but service is not out of the question.

“That would be more of an express route,” Carnopis said, comparing it to Route 44 that has limited stops from Caldwell to Boise and only runs once a day in each direction. “It would be seen more to get people to jobs.”

In the meantime, though, Hidden Springs has built 12 miles of trails through the 1,844-acre community with 70 percent of the multi-used paths separate from the street and 30 percent shared use with motorized vehicles.

“Active transportation (biking and walking) is more important to residents than waterfronts and golfing,” Gilman said.

The trails deliver residents to the Hidden Springs town center, where there is a dental office, a salon, a design studio, a finance office, a pizzeria, a mercantile restaurant/general store, a real estate office and a library branch.

“The big one is taking children to school,” Gilman said. “They do it walking and biking.”

Urban Land Institute senior fellow Ed McMahon told a Treasure Valley crowd that proximity to multi-use paths increases property values. Locally, Gilman said he has noticed that an identical house along a Hidden Springs path can demand \$50,000 more than a house away from such an amenity.

“There is a group of people who say this is what they want,” Gilman said.