

"Federation Corner" column
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Hop on a bike!

by Peggy Dennis
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Bicycling in the region and in Montgomery County is at a tipping point. It is rapidly being taken up as a viable and enjoyable form of transportation and recreation.

I first noticed this when attending a theatre in the U Street corridor downtown. Not only was there a Bikeshare station with its row of bright red, rental bicycles, but there were privately owned bikes everywhere: bikes locked to parking meters and street signs, chained to trees, chained to each other, and spilling out along the edges of the sidewalks. Hundreds of folks had come to this area on two wheels rather than four.

I've also noticed a change in Bethesda. Bike racks have proliferated, and at midday you can see a growing number of senior citizens tooling around on two wheels. It doesn't matter whether they live in the growing number of downtown high rise apartments, or have realized that a one- or two-mile bike ride from their suburban single family homes into the business district beats driving in to go to lunch or a movie. They are riding bicycles, and in growing numbers.

Bikeshare is expanding into many of our urban districts, and Rockville and Bethesda have been awarded bronze status as "Bicycle Friendly Communities" by the League of American Bicyclists. The League's homepage says that they have been "protecting your rights to safe and enjoyable bicycling since 1880. What started as a movement by "Wheelmen" on high-wheel bikes to get roads paved continues today with our advocacy on the federal level.

The League provides valuable education programs, helps create better biking environments, promotes bicycling as the option of choice and helps create bicycle-friendly communities. A community recognized by the League as "Bicycle Friendly" is one which "welcomes bicyclists by providing safe accommodation for cycling and encouraging people to bike for transportation and recreation. Encouraging bicycling is a simple way towards improving public health. With more people bicycling, communities experience reduced traffic demands, improved air quality and greater physical fitness."

On August 22, I participated in a VIP Bicycle Tour of downtown D.C. The District, under the leadership of former mayor, Adrienne Fenty – an avid bicyclist himself – made giant strides in improving facilities for bikers. We rode in a dedicated, two-way bike lane down the center of Pennsylvania Avenue NW, and along alternative forms of bike lanes on other streets. And we saw special green lights just for bicyclists allowing bikers to get a head start across busy intersections.

The improvements have spurred more people to take up cycling. And the more bicyclists there are in the streets, the more they become expected, and the slower, calmer and more considerate the drivers become. It's a win-win for all.

Recreation is great for bikers. During the Martin Luther King celebrations, I took my bike into D.C. on the Metro and then rode over to the Jefferson Memorial. Every Saturday and Sunday during the pleasanter months, rangers from the National Park Service lead free bicycle tours around the Mall. Get the particulars at: www.nps.gov/mall/planyourvisit/national-mall-bike-tour-page.htm

This past weekend, my husband and I went on the bicycle tour of the Agricultural Reserve organized by the Montgomery Countryside Alliance (mocoalliance.org) and the Potomac Pedalers (www.potomacpedalers.org), a club for recreational cyclists. Tours were offered with lengths between 18, 37, 57 and 76 miles.

The tour routes were planned to keep us on lightly traveled rural roads. These little country roads were edged with wild flowers and filled with the sounds of crickets and song birds. I stopped to watch the games going on at the Capital Polo Club – lots of Ultimate Frisbee tournaments, but no polo. We took a mid-point break for a picnic lunch, and chance to socialize, at Kingsbury Orchard. Kudos to Planning Commission Chairman Francoise Carrier, who cycled the tour with her daughter, Danielle, and fellow Planning Commissioner Casey Anderson. We rode the 18 mile loop together.

If you own a bike but don't think you would feel safe riding around in our urban areas, think again. The Washington Area Bicyclists Association (WABA) runs a variety of classes for adult cyclists of all levels-- Learn to Ride, a Bike Commuting Seminar, and a Confident City Cycling class. In the CCC class "participants of all levels are encouraged to attend these 3 hour classes which will have options for multiple skill levels ranging from simple bike handling skills and using trails, to learning avoidance maneuvers and riding with traffic."

The WABA Adult Bicycle Education program is offering a Confident City Cycling course for Montgomery County residents only on Sunday, October 6, 10:00 am to 1:00 pm in Friendship Heights. Full information and registration are available via the online WABA Course Calendar at www.waba.org/education/calendar.php

If you are a senior, here is one final inducement to get you on your bike: you can get just about anywhere for free. For instance, I can bike the two miles from my home into Potomac Village, put my bike on the bike rack on the front of the T2 Metrobus, go all the way to Rockville or Friendship Heights at no charge, then cycle on to other destinations or take my bike on the Metro to go downtown. Seniors ride Metrobus and Ride-On buses for free with a Senior SmarTrip card during off-peak hours. Just show the driver your Senior SmarTrip card.

School age school children can also use the buses and bike racks for free during designated hours. If you've never used one of the bike racks, it pays to find a bus at the end of the line and give yourself time to see how the rack works. It is easy but not self-evident, so it's worth learning and practicing how to use the rack when the bus is not in mid-route and other passengers are not held up while you figure it out. I speak from experience.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to the montgomerycivic@yahoo.com