

BICYCLE FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES IN THE US: AN INSPIRATION FOR NEW ZEALAND?

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Abstract

The League of American Bicyclists (L.A.B.) has had a "Bicycle Friendly Communities" programme running since 1996. At present there are over 100 "communities" recognised, ranging from towns of a few thousand, to cities of several million, including a region of 5000 km² and a university.

Community applications are assessed on criteria in education, encouragement, engineering, evaluation & planning, and enforcement by L.A.B. staff and external reviewers, and on feedback from local cyclists and advocates. There are four levels of award: bronze, silver, gold and platinum, and awards are reassessed quadrennially.

Some examples of the economic and social benefits that have been achieved with BFC status will be presented. Particular reference will be made to one of the platinum level communities, Boulder Colorado, based on first hand experience in July 2009. Boulder's achievements include:

- *A "Safe Routes to School" program, launched in 2005 to encourage more kids to walk and bike to school. One school reported that 75 percent of their students walked or biked to school. .*
- *More than 4,000 people participate in Boulder's Bike to Work Day. There are contests between employers, and huge community gatherings. This is part of a month long "walk and Bike Month in June each year.*
- *The city has over 450km of bike lanes or trails, covering 95% of arterial routes*
- *In 2004 a total of \$US3.1 million, 15% of Boulder's transportation budget, was dedicated to support bicycle mode operations, maintenance and enhancement.*
- *In 2003, biking accounted for 21% of commute trips and 14% of all trips in the community.*
- *Printed cycle maps of city and regional cycle networks, and an interactive bike route finding website*
- *A community cycle workshop to recycle bikes and train people in cycle maintenance.*

Introduction

We have an image of the United States of America as being the most car-centric Western culture we can imagine. There's no doubt that the car has dominated and shaped US cities and towns in the US for the last 60 years. However, things are changing. A scheme that has been run by a US cycling advocacy group since the mid-nineties to recognise and encourage bicycle friendly communities has recognised some surprising results.

The Bicycle Friendly Community scheme

The scheme is run by the League of American Bicyclists, formerly the League of American Wheelmen. The League promotes bicycling for fun, fitness and transportation, and works through advocacy and education for a bicycle-friendly America. The League represents the interests of America's 57 million bicyclists, including its 300,000 members and affiliates. For more information on the League, visit www.bikeleague.org.

The League launched its Bicycle Friendly Community scheme in 1996. At first there were relatively easy criteria for communities to meet. In 2002 the program was overhauled and a new, more rigorous application and review process was initiated. One important change was the creation of a four tiered award system – created with the intent of encouraging communities to continually improve. Each year there are two rounds of applications in March and August, with awards announced in May and October. The application form asks a series of about a dozen questions in each of five major areas of bicycle policy and programs.

- Engineering
- Education
- Encouragement
- Evaluation & Planning
- Enforcement

After a community submits the application and sends any appropriate supporting literature, the application is reviewed three ways:

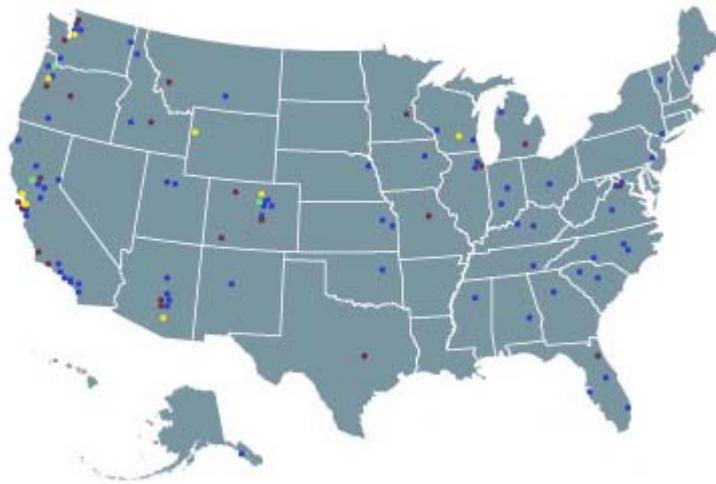
- a) League staff review the applications internally
- b) An external reviewer is asked to score each application, and
- c) Local cyclists – League members, club leaders etc., are asked to comment on the application and provide their perspective on the bicycle-friendliness of the community.

This last stage of the review is seen as important to the League, and local reviewers have definitely had an impact on many of the awards – or lack of awards.

To reach the higher levels of award, communities must score well across all five areas – communities that only have strong programs in one area are unlikely to be recognised.

There are now just over a hundred communities recognized by the scheme in 35 of the 50 states. Their distribution across the United States is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Map showing the location of bicycle friendly communities. The West Coast is strongly represented.



The first platinum level award was for Davis, California. Only two more platinum level awards have been granted, both to cities well known as having very strong cycling cultures and programmes, Boulder, Colorado, and Portland, Oregon. “Community” means more than just cities or towns - the East Pima region around Tucson in Arizona, covering a massive 5000km², and Stanford University both hold gold level awards. A list of the current three platinum, nine gold and twenty three silver awards is given in Table 1. In addition to these there are 67 bronze awards, and communities that have made progress but don’t yet make the grade are given an “honourable mention”.

In addition to the communities level scheme the League also encourages and recognizes support for cycling at a state and federal level. It now annually publishes a ranking of the 50 states, based on each state’s commitment to bicycling in six key areas: legislation, policies and programs, infrastructure, education and encouragement, evaluation and planning, and enforcement. For 2009, the top five highest scoring states ranked one through five are: Washington, 1; Wisconsin, 2; Maine, 3; Oregon, 4; and Minnesota, 5. The lowest scoring states ranked 46 through 50 are: New Mexico, 46; Alaska, 47; Oklahoma, 48; Montana, 49; and Alabama, 50.

To learn more about the League’s Bicycle Friendly Communities and States programs, visit <http://www.bicyclefriendlyamerica.org>.

Benefits of the Bicycle friendly community scheme

The Bicycle Friendly Communities scheme recognizes municipalities that actively support bicycling. A Bicycle-Friendly Community provides safe accommodation for cycling and encourages its residents 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. In addition, bicycle-friendly towns are often seen as places with a high quality of life. This can translate into increased property values, business growth and increased tourism.

The main benefits of the scheme are seen as

- Recognition
- Promotion
- Benchmarking
- Technical help
- Inspiration

The awards provide an opportunity to recognize people in the community that have worked long and hard to improve conditions for bicycling – usually without any great fanfare or recognition. Behind every successful bike community is a team of volunteers and leaders who deserve recognition and thanks, including local government leaders, planners, traffic engineers, cycle advocates and road engineers.

It can also enable greater progress by providing evaluation and advice for continued improvements. The fact that there is a review period after for years also encourages continued progress.

Table 1. The communities that have achieved the top three BFC award levels. This list does not yet include the October 2009 round. To save space the bronze awards are not listed separately.

Community	State	Current Award Level	Since	Population	Square kilometres
Davis	CA	Platinum	2005	63722	27
Portland	OR	Platinum	2003	533492	348
Boulder	CO	Platinum	2004	101500	62
Corvallis	OR	Gold	2003	53165	36
Fort Collins	CO	Gold	2003	118652	120
Jackson & Teton County	WY	Gold	2006	8647	7
Madison	WI	Gold	2006	221551	219
Palo Alto	CA	Gold	2003	56862	61
San Francisco	CA	Gold	2006	739426	122
Seattle	WA	Gold	2008	563374	368
Stanford University	CA	Gold	2003	13315	7
Tucson/East Pima Region	AZ	Gold	2004	1004477	4983
Ann Arbor	MI	Silver	2005	113100	73
Arlington	VA	Silver	2003	200226	67
Austin	TX	Silver	2007	681804	704
Bellingham	WA	Silver	2006	73460	66
Bend	OR	Silver	2005	88995	85
Chicago	IL	Silver	2005	2896016	606
Columbia	MO	Silver	2009	96093	155
Colorado Springs	CO	Silver	2008	360890	482
Durango	CO	Silver	2008	15878	18
Eugene	OR	Silver	2004	142681	105
Folsom	CA	Silver	2003	63960	56
Gainesville	FL	Silver	2004	117182	127
Minneapolis	MN	Silver	2008	373188	150
Missoula	MT	Silver	2003	57053	62
Olympia	WA	Silver	2004	44460	48
Presidio of San Francisco	CA	Silver	2003	3000	3
San Luis Obispo	CA	Silver	2007	44174	28
Santa Barbara	CA	Silver	2003	87370	49
Santa Cruz	CA	Silver	2007	54593	40
Scottsdale	AZ	Silver	2005	221792	477
Steamboat Springs	CO	Silver	2007	9815	26
Tempe	AZ	Silver	2003	160676	104
Wood River Valley	ID	Silver	2008	12506	44
A total of 67 communities, areas, counties or cities in a total of 30 states		Bronze	2003 – 2009	6344 – 8143197	13 – 12460

Boulder, Colorado - a platinum level Bicycle friendly Community

Boulder, Colorado, with a population of 100, 000 and covering 24 square miles is one of the platinum level award holders.

Figure 2. The logo from League of American Bicyclists depicting the platinum Bicycle friendly award



held by Boulder.

This award was first given in 2004 and then renewed in 2008. This is a description from League of some of the achievements Boulder had made, under the five area that are covered by the award evaluation.

Education: In 2005, the Boulder Safe Routes to School pilot program was launched. Three schools implemented non-infrastructure programs to encourage more kids to walk and bike to school. One school reported that 75 percent of their students walked or biked to school — a 620 percent increase from before the pilot.

Encouragement: More than 4,000 people participate in Boulder's Bike to Work Day. There are contests between employers, and huge community gatherings. Boulder has a clear dedication to installing bike lanes; a bicycle maintenance program available to all citizens during June; and a newly redesigned bike and pedestrian map.

Engineering: Boulder's bicycle network is second to none. The city employs a Complete Streets approach when considering major transportation facility enhancements, and makes sure that the bicycling facilities are swept even before the roads are. At least 95 percent of arterials have bike lanes or trails on them. They recently completed two major underpasses, and offers online bike mapping. A total of \$3.1 million, 15 percent of Boulder's 2004 transportation budget, was dedicated to support bicycle mode operations/maintenance and enhancement activities.

Evaluation: Tracking numbers is important to Boulder — in 2003, biking accounted for 21 percent of commute trips and 14 percent of all trips in the community. This is up from 10.6 percent and 9.1 percent respectively in 1990. Bike use and other non-automotive modes have limited the growth in vehicle miles of travel in Boulder to about 1 percent annually since 1990.

The centrepiece of Boulder Bike programme is its online presence. Figure 3 shows a screen shot of the main bike page on the city's webpage at <http://www.bouldercolorado.net> and illustrates the level of support for various aspects of cycling. As can be seen, biking is just part of a strategy that also promotes bussing and walking.

Figure 3. The main cover page for Boulder's many bike programmes from <http://www.bouldercolorado.net>



There is an interactive bike route planning map at <http://GOBikeBoulder.net> that, given a start point and a destination, gives a map and a detailed route. The user also specifies whether they prefer to ride on roads or on off-road paths, and it is a reflection of the “depth” of Boulder’s bike network that this can be an option. When you first register to use this site, there is a bonus illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Coupon received when registering to use the online route finding map at GoBikeBoulder.net

To claim your free gift, print out the coupon below and bring it to the GO Boulder office at 1739 Broadway, second floor. Not sure how to get there? Map your route using GOBikeBoulder.net.

*Handlebar map holder (\$8 value)
2007 City of Boulder Bike & Pedestrian Map (\$3 value)

*Map holders will be available while supplies last.
When they're gone, you'll get the map, which is pretty great too.



To receive your free gift, bring in this coupon for a free:

- Handlebar map holder* (\$8 value) or
- 2007 City of Boulder Bike and Pedestrian Map (\$3 value)

Compliments of GO Boulder/city of Boulder
303-441-3266

Redeem at the GO Boulder offices:
1739 Broadway, 2nd Floor
Weekdays, 8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

*while supplies last.
Expires: 6/31/09



My impressions of Boulder: July 2009

The motivation of this talk was that I had the opportunity to work in Boulder for two weeks as part of my paid job in July of this year. I was working at NCAR, the National Centre of Atmospheric Research, which now has three separate campuses in Boulder. The best known one is one is the iconic Table Mesa Lab on a spur 200m above the city. Two are on the flat part of the city a little to the North and east of the city centre. The extra campuses are a result of green belt restrictions on any expansion of the Table Mesa lab. I’ve visited Boulder a number of times over the last 20 years, but this was to be my longest stay. The work

included days working at each of the three campuses. An old friend lent me a spare bike for the duration of my visit.

First impressions of biking in Boulder were really positive, despite the many of the city streets having multiple lanes and carrying significant traffic volumes, the provision for cycles on was good, with cycle lanes on, signage, and even markings on the position of cycle-sensitive sensors for traffic signals. Many intersections had pedestrian islands on each corner delineated by a separated left turning lane, and it was extremely easy for cyclists to get to these to use pedestrian crossings signals, for example to make hook turns. The few times that I tried lane changes to make left turns I was given a wide berth, giving me the impression that this wasn't all that common and that hook turns were the more usual left turn technique. It seems that the phasing of the traffic signals meant you'd get through an intersection faster with a hook left turn anyway, as vehicles turning left had to wait almost a full signal cycle to get a protected left turn. A particularly good feature was that on roads with a significant gradient, the uphill side would have larger cycle lane, designated a climbing lane. On the downhill side, there would be no cycle lane at all but signs telling cyclists to "take the lane" backed up with cycle signs on the roadway.

There is also the off-road network, consisting of path ways along city creeks and fully separated paths along arterial roads. The backbone of this was Boulder Creek path running East-West through town and passing very close to the main business district. Some of the funding for them has come as a result of the need to improve resilience to flash floods. Creek underpasses are widened to accommodate a cycle path and thus increase their flood capacity. The creek underpasses allowed for re-entry to the road system at both sides of the road, so that there was nowhere where you were trying to re-enter a road with an awkward left turn that had to cross all lanes. Where there were separated paths this was achieved with underpasses or other techniques. Another feature of the off road network was the signage: the streets above each underpass were clearly named, there were directional signs at major path intersections, and hazard warning signs where required. It gave the impression of being a developed and carefully thought out network.

From my point of view there was even a third level of bicycle facility. Every single footpath I saw had kerb ramps at every street or driveway crossing as if it was also made for bikes. It was common to see bikes on the footpaths, and this added another option for bicycles. If for example you needed to go a few blocks in a direction that meant you'd have to cross the street to do so, it was more expedient to use the footpath as a contra-flow bike path.

NCAR was a model employer in assisting staff and visitors with transport. Boulder has a well established public transport system with suburban "Park'n'Ride" sites. NCAR run shuttle buses of its own between its campuses, in a loop that included some of these transit places as well as shopping and accommodation centres to cater for visitors. The NCAR shuttles also had bike racks installed. They had a fleet of loan bikes, but they were all taken when I was there. They, like many employers in Boulder would provide a bus pass to staff and

participated in “guaranteed ride home” scheme to cover days when you had to get home quicker than by bike. These are just some of the schemes supported by local government and had tax-free status. I enjoyed the 200m climb up to the Mesa lab on the days I was working there, but was told where to take a shower when I arrived.

I visited the Boulder city offices to get an idea of any bicycle programmes I’d missed. I found information on a wide range of walking, cycling and public transport programmes actively supported by the city. Some were specific to Boulder and some were a combined local government initiative over the wider Denver metro area. I learnt of the walk and Bike month that was in June. There were leaflets giving advice and safety tips for cyclists and other road users.

I also visited Community Cycles, which is a ‘bicycle kitchen’ community workshop. It recycles bikes and runs bike maintenance classes. If you help there as volunteer for 12 hours you can walk away with a recycled bike of your own. Community Cycles is a partner in Boulder’s bike month, and also has a maintenance contract for NRAR fleet of loan bikes. <http://communitycycles.org>

In the weekend I was able to visit a small town called Rollinsville in the mountains at 2500m, by catching the bus up Boulder Canyon and then biking 10 km. It was a Saturday morning and there were more than a dozen bikes carried on the bus, two on the front rack and the rest in the luggage lockers. Twenty years ago when I lived near Rollinsville for a while, this transport option did not exist.

The overall impression was once of being a lot more friendly and accommodating to cyclists that anywhere in New Zealand. It was fun to ride in! I’ve been to cycle advocacy heaven.

The “take home” messages

The US is making great progress in being bicycle friendly, at least in certain places. In the one place I visited, there is fantastic support for cycling and other alternative forms of transport from the city government and the community. Rather than reinventing wheels, I think we can tailor some campaigns and engineering solution in New Zealand around what has been done in places like Boulder.

The bicycle friendly community award scheme has some interesting features. It allows recognition of a community wide level of support for cyclists, rather than single projects, and has award levels to recognise different achievement levels. An award is more enduring in that communities can continue to promote themselves as holding an award and there is a periodic review. Perhaps these are things that we can incorporate into our bicycle friendly awards in New Zealand.