

Lincoln, Nebraska as a Bicycle-Friendly Community? Response of the Great Plains Bicycling Club

The League of American Bicyclists requested comments from the Great Plains Bicycling Club (GPBC) on Lincoln's application to be considered as a Bicycle-Friendly Community. Shortly after receiving this request, however, the Club learned that the League had already decided to give the city an "honorable mention" in lieu of an award. As such, the purpose of this document is not only to respond to the League's original set of questions, but also to respond to the League's critique of Lincoln. The questions presented by the League were as follow:

1. *What is this community's greatest strength or accomplishment in its efforts to promote bicycling?*
2. *What are its weaknesses in its efforts to support bicycling? What should this community focus on in order to better serve cyclists?*
3. *Please rate this community's performance in regards to the five categories:*
Engineering: no award, bronze, silver, gold, platinum
Education: no award, bronze, silver, gold, platinum
Encouragement: no award, bronze, silver, gold, platinum
Evaluation and Planning: no award, bronze, silver, gold, platinum
Enforcement: no award, bronze, silver, gold, platinum
4. *Overall, is this community worthy of recognition? What level (bronze, silver, gold, or platinum) would you consider awarding? See the attached sheet for guidance on the award levels.*
5. *Would you like to be involved in potentially presenting a Bicycle Friendly Community award to this community?*

The League provided the following comments with regard to Lincoln's application:

1. *The Lincoln trails network is a terrific resource and the various programs focused on the safety of children are excellent – particularly noteworthy is the commitment to plowing the multi-use paths on school routes by 7:00 a.m. when necessary.*
2. *Reviewers noted the great promise of the recently adopted bicycle plan and multi-modal transportation study. The city has some important elements of a bicycle friendly community in place and on the drawing board.*
3. *Reviewers also identified a number of areas where progress needs to be made in order for the city to be designated as a bicycle friendly community, including:*
 - a. *Complete the improvements planned for next year that will expand and connect the trails network*

- b. *Repeal the mandatory sidepath law*
- c. *Initiate an on-road bike lane and traffic calming program to make the arterial roadways and neighborhood streets more conducive to bicycling*
- d. *Install bike racks on the bus fleet*
- e. *Focus Lincoln Bike Months on more utilitarian cycling – riding to work, to the shops, to school – and engage local businesses in the promotion*
- f. *An outreach program to motorists to promote a “share the road” ethic, which will be particularly important as the bicycle network expands from a trail base to include an on-street element*
- g. *Adult and student education programs to encourage better bicycling behavior and more bicycling*

In many respects, the GPBC finds the League’s comments to be appropriate. To respond to the League, and also to provide input to other “interested parties” that may review this document, we respond first to the League’s comments and then provide our feedback to the League’s questions.

– COMMENTS ON LEAGUE RECOMMENDATIONS –

LEAGUE RECOMMENDATION #1: *(The) Lincoln trails network is a terrific resource and the various programs focused on the safety of children are excellent – particularly noteworthy is the commitment to plowing the multi-use paths on school routes by 7:00 a.m. when necessary.*

TRAILS: While there will always be ways to improve it, we agree that Lincoln’s trail system is something for Lincoln to be proud of and a way in which the city demonstrates its friendliness to bicyclists.

CHILD SAFETY: We agree that the local Kiwanis activity to help educate youngsters is commendable, although we note that the bicycle rodeos do not include any on-street component. In general, we feel that the Lincoln Public School system does not do enough to promote and support children riding bicycles to school. We appreciate that there may be safety concerns with children in the lower grades, but there does not appear to be any significant effort to encourage older children to bicycle to school or to provide additional education for older youth to be able to safely ride longer distances on bicycles.

LEAGUE RECOMMENDATION #2: *Reviewers noted the great promise of the recently adopted bicycle plan and multi-modal transportation study. The city has some important elements of a bicycle friendly community in place and on the drawing board.*

We agree with this statement, with the emphasis on *promise*. We feel that the products of the Multi-Modal Transportation Task Force and subsequent plans for the implementation of those products should be viewed carefully next year and in the years to come.

LEAGUE RECOMMENDATION #3a: *Complete the improvements planned for next year that will expand and connect the trails network.*

We agree with this comment, but we do not feel that Lincoln's selection as a BFC should be tied to some particular stretch of trail or underpass or bridge. We do not think that Lincoln should get a designation simply because it completes its planned improvements; similarly, we do not think that a designation should be withheld if difficulties keep the city from doing everything that is planned. Public officials and private parties working to implement plans of this nature have done so well at it in the past that they have spoiled us somewhat with their successes. We do not want to take those successes for granted.

LEAGUE RECOMMENDATION #3b: *Repeal the mandatory sidepath law.*

We feel it is inappropriate to condition the status of Lincoln as a BFC on whether or not a state law is repealed, particularly when that law applies only to a 3-mile stretch of highway (where there is a nice city multi-use trail within 10 to 50 yards of the highway). We suspect that there would be extremely little bicycle usage of the 4-lane high-volume highway if these restrictions were removed. Although we support repeal of the state sidepath law as a matter of principle, there are plenty of other laws that we would consider more important candidates for change than this one. We do not believe that the League should refrain from giving Lincoln recognition based on the repeal of a state law, which is certainly not under the control of the Mayor or City Council.

LEAGUE RECOMMENDATION #3c: *Initiate an on-road bike lane and traffic calming program to make the arterial roadways and neighborhood streets more conducive to bicycling.*

Lincoln has plans to implement a few miles of bike lanes in the next few years as an experiment. We are somewhat skeptical that such a minor experiment will be sufficient to introduce local cyclists to bike lanes or to be an accurate gauge of their acceptance and usefulness for the future. Serious discussion of the design, placement, safety implications and necessity of these bike lanes has not yet taken place, although we hope and somewhat expect that this will during the later stages of the Multi-Modal Transportation Task Force's work. Like cyclists elsewhere, some of our members support bike lanes while others oppose them. They remain unconvinced that wider streets would not offer most of the same advantages and fewer of the disadvantages.

With proper motorist education, most of our members would be likely to agree that bike lanes are helpful on arterial streets where there is no parking (such that the bike lane will not require bicyclists to ride next to parked cars). An advantage to bike lanes may be that they will encourage more bicyclists to ride on the streets instead of on the sidewalks, but there are lots of examples of bike lanes that do not enhance safety for bicyclists. With the caveat that our members feel strongly both ways, we believe that Lincoln's status as a BFC should be conditioned upon the plans and then actions to make it easier, more appealing and no less safe for Lincoln's bicyclists to travel throughout the city on more of its streets as well as on Lincoln's trail system. It is hard to see how a sincere effort in this regard would not involve more interest in bike lanes by the city than currently exists. The results of the Multi-Modal Transportation Task Force will be crucial in this regard.

We simply do not understand the recommendation to use traffic calming on neighborhood streets to make them “more conducive to bicycling.” We are unaware of a local “neighborhood street” (i.e., a residential street with a 25mph speed limit) that is difficult for a bicyclist to ride on.

LEAGUE RECOMMENDATION #3d: *Install bike racks on the bus fleet.*

While this is appealing, we view this idea as a lower priority and suspect that there may be better places for the city to spend its money. Lincoln’s current bus ridership tends to include a significant percentage of people who would not be good candidates for this feature. Of course, we also appreciate that the bus system may not attract those who would benefit from this feature until after it is installed.

A consideration that we feel probably places this as a lower priority for selection of Lincoln as a BFC is that persons who are capable of riding a bicycle to a bus stop, loading the bicycle on a carrier, taking it off of a carrier, and then riding it to their final destination, will also be people who are able to simply ride their bike from home to work. Lincoln is not as large as most places where this works (e.g., Seattle), where a complete one-way trip to work on a bicycle may take too long to be practical. We believe that the great majority of bicyclists living and working in Lincoln can ride from home to work in less than 30 minutes.

LEAGUE RECOMMENDATION #3e: *Focus Lincoln Bike Months on more utilitarian cycling – riding to work, to the shops, to school – and engage local businesses in the promotion.*

We agree. Lincoln’s “Bike Months” were first declared in 2003. June was included along with May to include the Fathers’ Day “Trail Trek” ride sponsored by the Lincoln Journal-Star newspaper. This ride attracted 1200 people in its first year and helped raise funds for local trails. We hope that it will become a successful annual event. Nevertheless, we agree that Bike to Work day and week activities should be higher profile and given more of a boost by the city. The Journal-Star promoted Trail Trek very effectively, but virtually no mention was made in any media of Bike to Work day and week, and we are not aware of any significant activity by local businesses to promote it.

LEAGUE RECOMMENDATION #3f: *An outreach program to motorists to promote a “share the road” ethic, which will be particularly important as the bicycle network expands from a trail base to include an on-street element.*

We agree with the desirability of an outreach program. Our general experience, however, is that the overwhelming majority of motorists on the streets of Lincoln are courteous to bicycles and that we are not riding in an environment where hostile motorists are common. Having said that, virtually every cyclist that puts on a lot of miles has a few tales involving inconsiderate or hostile motorists. In addition, our experiences on county blacktop roads in the area surrounding Lincoln have been worse, and we think that a “share the road” program in the Lincoln area may help in the areas surrounding the city. It does not take many incidents to make an impression. As such, with the caveat that some local cyclists will disagree, we think that the primary focus of an outreach program should be on encouraging ridership and on rider safety. “Share the road” should definitely be included in the messages, but not as their primary focus.

LEAGUE RECOMMENDATION #3g: *Adult and student education programs to encourage better bicycling behavior and more bicycling.*

We absolutely agree. It is hard to push for programs to educate motorists to be more civil to bicyclists when so many bicyclists disobey the rules of the road. We would support a variety of approaches to encourage people to ride bicycles, and we would also support educational programs to make newer bicyclists aware of how an experienced bicyclist would best handle various situations. Classes are certainly one approach, but reading materials suitable for adult self-instruction should also be available, because it is difficult to get many people to attend classes of any sort. We do not have all the answers here, but we certainly agree with the League's identification of the needs.

– COMMENTS ON LEAGUE QUESTIONS –

LEAGUE QUESTION #1: *What is this community's greatest strength or accomplishment in its efforts to promote bicycling?*

Lincoln's trail system is clearly its greatest accomplishment. While there are connections between trails yet to be completed and places where intersections detract from its value, it is nevertheless Lincoln's #1 bicycling-related asset. The community should take pride in it and continue efforts to fill in gaps, to put trails in new areas, and to make other improvements to the system.

LEAGUE QUESTION #2: *What are its weaknesses in its efforts to support bicycling? What should this community focus on in order to better serve cyclists?*

In large part, we will refer you to your own comments and our responses to them. We will reiterate that some of the "weaknesses" cited by the League are fairly minor items that would be well down our list in terms of priority. Items that the League did not mention or that we want to emphasize include the following:

- (a) We feel that the promotion of bicycling within Lincoln's government structure needs to be enhanced. This is probably our primary suggestion, at least as a start, because so much else will flow from it. The Multi-Modal Transportation Task Force holds promise as a means to improve the lot of bicyclists in the city, but it is a group appointed for a specific project. It will likely go away in the second half of 2004. The Mayor's Pedestrian-Bicycle Advisory Committee (PBAC) is the closest that we have to a permanent government group to represent bicyclists.

The resolution that created the PBAC and its track record to date, however, reflect a very strong orientation towards trails with relatively little attention given to the many other issues of interest to bicycling. In addition, the PBAC has developed a pattern of primarily tackling tasks or issues presented by someone in city government. This only reinforces its tendency to stick with a very trails-centric agenda because the Parks and Recreation Department supports it so well. It does not need to look elsewhere to fill its agenda.

It is our opinion that a city bicycle coordinator (or, more likely, a city bicycle-pedestrian coordinator) would be the best way for Lincoln city government to focus on the entire spectrum of matters important to bicyclists. We are not the first group to have this opinion. Several years ago, a “charrette” was held by the city to get citizen input on bicycling and pedestrian issues. Approximately 75 people with diverse interests attended. That group identified the hiring of a city bicycle-pedestrian coordinator as its most important recommendation.

The bottom line is that Lincoln needs to add a city bicycle-pedestrian coordinator or, at least as a start, develop a much more rounded approach to bicycling needs by the Pedestrian-Bicycle Advisory Committee. As an action that would not require any expenditure by the city, we suggest that the resolution creating the PBAC be amended to add clear charges for the Committee to address the many other areas of bicycling-related concerns that we are discussing within this document.

- (b) There are a number of traffic-related and/or specific bicycle-related ordinances that should be revised. This effort will probably involve looking at some state laws (the sidepath law is a state law) as well, although we think that it may be easier and probably best for us to first focus on city ordinances. In this effort, the sidepath law would be a fairly low priority. We support its repeal because of the precedent that it sets even though, at this writing, we do not view it as causing any problems.
- (c) Local bicyclists have been quite upset in recent months – justifiably so – on account of the lack of action by our County Attorney on a county case involving a bicyclist’s death, where the fault of the driver appears clear. This follows on the death of another local bicyclist a few years ago in tougher circumstances (dusk & poor visibility) in which no charges were ever filed.
- (d) We are concerned that some of the city’s trails are being put in places where bike lanes would better serve bicyclists. These are “trails” that are simply extra-wide sidewalks running along arterial streets. They do not avoid streets and driveways intersecting with the arterials. Such “trails” require a cyclist to cross many more motorist paths than if the cyclist was on the street. In many of these situations, bike lanes would appear to be safer because they would do a better job of not encouraging conflicts with traffic entering the arterial. We strongly support greenway-type trails; we are skeptical as to the utility of trails that are merely extra-wide sidewalks. We certainly do not believe that they have the effect of enhancing neighborhoods and property values like greenway-type trails.
- (e) We agree with the League’s suggestions that Lincoln should improve its efforts to encourage and instruct adults and older children with regard to riding bicycles. The only major effort in instructing children (the rodeos involving 2000 4th – 6th grade children each year) has no on-street component. As part of this overall effort, it is vital that the Lincoln Public School system gets much more involved and be supportive. As it is now, we get the impression that the LPS is opposed to almost any idea involving bicycles because of “liability concerns.” While “liability concerns” are certainly a legitimate consideration for almost any business or public policy decision, we must look at the benefits, costs, and risks

of bicycle riding versus the benefits, costs, and risks of promoting a sedentary lifestyle. This would be of great value to the children as they grow into adults; studies have shown that the life-long risks of walking and bicycling are much less than the life-long risks of NOT walking and bicycling.

LEAGUE QUESTION #3: *Please rate this community's performance in regards to the five categories:*

Engineering: *no award, bronze, silver, gold, platinum*

Education: *no award, bronze, silver, gold, platinum*

Encouragement: *no award, bronze, silver, gold, platinum*

Evaluation and Planning: *no award, bronze, silver, gold, platinum*

Enforcement: *no award, bronze, silver, gold, platinum*

Our bicycle club is a very heterogeneous group that has differing views on these issues. Rather than to attempt the nearly impossible – fairly characterize the Club members' diverse opinions by means of a specific rating on each of these points – we chose instead to make a few brief comments on each of these points that best represent the Club as a whole.

First off, a number of our members felt, in spite of the many criticisms that we have made, that Lincoln already deserved to be awarded BFC status at the bronze level. To a great extent, through the planning and efforts of almost no one, *Lincoln is a nice place to ride a bicycle*. With rare exceptions, motorists are courteous to bicyclists. There are many convenient side streets that do not require any extra city effort to be nice places for bicyclists to ride without a lot of challenge. Secondary streets in the central parts of the city are well connected. The terrain does not involve challenging hills. Add Lincoln's trail system to this – a system that has required a substantial amount of planning, effort and resources – and Lincoln certainly is a "bicycle-friendly community."

With regard to your five categories:

Engineering – Lincoln gets relatively high marks for its trail system, even though current efforts to connect the trails still need to be seen through to completion. Although we do not view this activity as highly significant, the city has designated some on-street bicycle routes. On balance, however, it is our opinion that the city has not comprehensively addressed the ability of bicyclists to use the street network to go places not served by trails. We suspect that an examination of needs will identify the desirability of bike lanes on a number of arterials, even if Lincoln has characteristics that may make the need for bike lanes smaller than for many other cities. Club members have diverse and conflicting opinions with regard to the desirability of bike lanes, and are especially unenthusiastic about bike lanes where they put bicyclists next to parked cars, but the complete lack of city action with regard to bike lanes is clearly a black mark.

Education and Encouragement – We find it difficult to separate those two areas. People with bicycling experience and understanding will want to ride, and it is difficult to encourage someone to ride when that person is intimidated by the thought of riding on streets. There is particularly a need to provide programs for student-age bicyclists. In these regards, without demeaning the few commendable things that are done, we find Lincoln to be lacking.

Evaluation and Planning – The city’s evaluation and planning with regard to the trail network has been commendable, but the results of the Multi-Modal Transportation Task Force appear likely to determine whether the city approaches the silver-gold level versus being eligible for honorable mention. It is the crucial next step.

Enforcement – On the negative side, (a) there have been cases where motorists involved in bicycle collisions have not been ticketed and/or prosecuted, as it appears they should have been; (b) there have been instances of police officers who did not understand bicycling-related laws, and (c) Lincoln’s bicycling-related laws are in need of revision. A recent incident in the county has generated plenty of hard feelings among cyclists. A bicyclist was killed six months ago by a motorist passing on a hill, and the county law enforcement officers noted violations on the driver’s behalf, yet the County Attorney (who also handles prosecutions within the city) has not filed any charges against the driver.

We also note that there are a number of laws relating to bicyclists that should be revised. On this count, we criticize the Lincoln Police Department because it indicated that it does not want the Pedestrian-Bicycle Advisory Committee to pursue the subject.

On the positive side, Lincoln has police officers on bicycles in the central part of the city and unfavorable bicycle-related experiences with Lincoln’s police have been relatively uncommon. Officers will cite or warn bicyclists riding on the sidewalks in downtown Lincoln. Unfortunately, we also note that there is a relatively high rate of inappropriate bicycling behaviors in the downtown area (i.e., running lights, riding on sidewalks, going the wrong way on streets, and not being in proper position in turn lanes), but we do not know that we can blame that on lack of enforcement. It may be that officers downtown are doing as well with this as they can, but that the problem is larger than it should be on account of little cyclist education.

On balance, we believe that both Lincoln and Nebraska need improvement in the area of the bicycling-related laws on their books. With regard to enforcement, we have significant concerns with the lack of action by the County Attorney on some important bicycle-related cases. We believe that a major first step in this direction would be a willingness to work with bicycling advocates to consider various revisions of laws and to discuss whether changes in enforcement are necessary.

LEAGUE QUESTION #4: Overall, is this community worthy of recognition? What level (bronze, silver, gold, or platinum) would you consider awarding? See the attached sheet for guidance on the award levels.

This question is moot for 2003, of course, as this decision has already been made. Some of our members felt, however, that Lincoln should have received a bronze award, in spite of its shortcomings, based on its trail network in addition to the fact that it is already a generally pleasant and relatively safe place for a person to ride a bicycle. Others felt that an award was inappropriate based on Lincoln’s complete lack of bike lanes, lack of education and promotion of bicycling, recent inaction by the County Attorney in several bicycling-related cases, and/or because of bad experiences with local motorists.

Even those members who would have voted for a bronze designation in 2003 generally agree, however, that an important factor for selection at any level in 2004 should be the product of the Multi-Modal Transportation Task Force and the city's plans for its implementation. We will despair if this planning document goes in the wrong direction; we will point with pride to it if it demonstrates a commitment to encourage cycling and to provide cycling-related facilities. This commitment will necessarily require greater attention within city government to the needs of bicyclists; a bicycle/pedestrian coordinator within city government would certainly be strong evidence that Lincoln has moved to this level of commitment.

The other key factor that we see relates to improvements in encouragement and education, both for adults and for school age children old enough to be able to ride responsibly. Adult education and encouragement can come from many places, but it is difficult to see how anything can be effective for children unless the Lincoln Public School system makes a policy decision to actively promote and support the riding of bicycles to school.

LEAGUE QUESTION #5: Would you like to be involved in potentially presenting a Bicycle Friendly Community award to this community?

Yes, we would be interested if Lincoln qualifies for a bronze or better designation based on more than just building additional trails. Having said that, we feel that it would be presumptuous for the Great Plains Bicycling Club to be the only organization involved with this presentation. Although the support of bicycling involves much more than just trails, Lincoln's trail system will continue to be the jewel in its BFC crown and the Great Plains Trails Network is the organization that has worked so hard for many years to support the development of trails in and near the Lincoln area. They are a larger organization than the GPBC and they raise a substantial amount of money for trails. Therefore, while we would want to participate in a presentation, we feel that the Great Plains Trails Network should be the lead organization in presenting any awards.

– IN CONCLUSION –

The Great Plains Bicycling Club is divided in response to the question of whether Lincoln should have received a bronze BFC designation for 2003 versus an honorable mention. Perhaps it is just as well that we did not receive an award (presumably bronze), because the events of the next six months or so will make it much clearer whether Lincoln should get an award. Even though we feel that the community is a nice place to ride a bicycle, we agree with the League that there are many improvements that can be made. Some of these are fairly important.

We agree with the League that the city's emphasis on its trails network, while commendable, has had the unfortunate side effect of substantially less attention being given to on-road cycling. Trails can be great for recreational riding and of value for transportation, but bicycling as a means of transportation will suffer if more attention is not given to the encouragement and support of on-road bicycling as well. We do not want less attention given to trails; rather, we want more attention given to other bicycling-related issues and needs.

For 2004, we feel that an especially important factor for the League to examine will be the product of the Multi-Modal Transportation Task Force. If it develops a good set of plans, then

the League should also examine the city's commitment to its implementation. Part of this will be a better representation of bicyclists within city government. Although not directly tied to Comprehensive Plan changes and implementation, we also feel that a major need is for the Lincoln Public Schools to embrace bicycles as a desirable means for students above an appropriate age to use to get to school, and to demonstrate this through policies and facilities designed to educate and encourage students' riding of bicycles.

While we believe that all of the items that we have mentioned are worthy, we certainly do not want to hold the city to a standard of perfection, at least not for an award at the bronze level. We emphasize that meaningful progress should be the standard for 2004.

Please feel free to contact any or all of the following persons should you desire additional input with regard to this matter:

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