

Advocates urge bike lanes for health, safety and clean air

By Paul Alongi

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Matt Griffin says he has no problem rambling over rocks and tree roots at 30 mph, but he refuses to take his mountain bike on the road, where he'd have to share lanes with cars.

"Everybody has a horror story about how they were almost killed by a car," he said. "I just think, 'If it was that close so many times, when's it going to be my turn?'"

If this July is anything like the last one, the state's bicyclists could be in for a rough month. Two riders died and more were hurt than in any other month.

This year has a death toll, too. Leonard Rivers, 53, died in a hit-and-run wreck early June 17 on Poinsett Highway north of Greenville.

"He was riding where there should have been, or could have been, a sidewalk," said his widow, Sarah Rivers.

Upstate cyclists said bike lanes and wider highway shoulders would make the roads safer while encouraging exercise and helping clean the air.

But adding bike lanes isn't as easy as painting a white stripe down the road. One mile of bike lane runs about \$100,000, said Tom Dodds, pedestrian and bicycle coordinator for the state Department of Transportation.

"Cost is the issue," said state Sen. Brad Hutto, an Orangeburg Democrat and bicyclist who co-sponsored a resolution declaring May "Bicycle Safety Month."

Mele Williams fights for bikers' rights in Washington, D.C. She grew up in Taylors and rides the streets of downtown Greenville when she visits her mother.

While Cleveland Park is a comfortable place to ride, the rest of downtown could use wider shoulders and more bike lanes, she said.

"It's come a long way since I was a kid, but it certainly could be more bicycle-friendly," said Williams, government relations director for the League of American Bicyclists.

In North Carolina's Outer Banks, a \$6.7 million investment in bike-friendly lanes helped increase tourism, pumping \$60 million into the economy and creating 1,400 jobs, according to a study this year by North Carolina State University.

South Carolina plans to spend \$1.9 million to lay 20.8 miles of bike lanes along a mountainous portion of State 11 stretching from Oconee County to near Table Rock State Park.

Last year, the state added 25 miles of bike lanes and bike-friendly paths, Dodds said. And 2-foot-wide shoulders on two-lane highways have been standard for about two years, he said.

Diane Eldridge, education and advocacy director for Upstate Forever, said lanes need to be at least 4 feet wide to accommodate casual riders who might be intimidated by traffic whooshing by.

"If you hit a rock, there's no forgiving," she said. "You're going to fall in front of a car."

Safety isn't the only issue. Advocates for health and clean air have pushed for the lanes, too.

A study last year that linked urban sprawl and obesity called for governments to add bike lanes, crosswalks and sidewalks. Pickens County had the worst sprawl rate and highest probability of obesity in the state, according to Smart Growth America and the Surface Transportation Project.

Clean-air advocates have said that bike lanes can encourage residents to travel by bicycle, rather than using cars that pump pollutants into the air. Greenville, Spartanburg and Anderson counties have until 2007 to clean the air or face federal penalties that would make it harder for businesses to locate here.

Randy Charles of Greenville said that when he takes long rides, he finds big differences between North Carolina and South Carolina.

Lanes are wide enough for two bikes to ride alongside each other north of the border, but narrow shoulders nearer to home leave him perilously close to traffic, he said.

"It's kind of hard to have fun," Charles said, "if you constantly have to worry about cars."

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Graphic: Staff

Biking dangers

Bicycle accidents in the state peaked during the summer months last year with injuries reaching a high in July.

Injured Deaths

J	32	0
F	22	2
M	31	0
A	45	3
M	52	1
J	52	2
J	62	2
A	60	1
S	55	1
O	55	0
N	39	1
D	29	2

SOURCE: State Department of Transportation