
History of Bicycling in Wisconsin

Bicycles first gained popularity in Wisconsin over 100 years ago as a practical transportation and recreation vehicle for adults. In the book *The Good Roads Movement in Wisconsin, 1890-1911*,¹ it was noted that the first Wisconsin bicyclists were seen in Racine “spinning around Market Square” in 1878. It is estimated that in 1890 a thousand adults in Milwaukee owned cycles or “wheels.” Several years later, this figure had climbed to 15,000 statewide.

Bicyclists quickly became organized in the 1890s. There were eleven organizations in Milwaukee alone. Cyclists became involved in the movement for better roads on which to ride their machines. According to *Good Roads Movement in Wisconsin*, the Wisconsin Division of the League of American Wheelmen (LAW)² spurred interest in and support for road improvements and the “Good Roads” movement in Wisconsin: “Wisconsin LAW members campaigned throughout the decade for highway reform. Their chief consuls scattered throughout the towns of the state, made reports on road conditions and continually urged their club members to request that local and state officials pay closer attention to highway problems.” The LAW focused most of its attention on improving country roads that led into trading centers.

The Wisconsin legislature, under Chapter 308, Laws of 1901, authorized counties to construct and maintain bicycle side paths along any public road or street, and to appoint a board of cyclists to serve as “side path commissioners.” The Board could issue bicycle side path licenses annually for “not less than 50 cents nor more than one dollar.”

The enthusiasm for bicycles waned soon after the turn of the century with the emergence of the motor vehicle. But unlike in Europe, where motor cars took decades to supersede bicycles, American cyclists never had the chance to coexist with the motoring public.³ As a result, when automobiles came on the scene, bicycles experienced a sudden drop in popularity and status as they went from being considered a high-class mode of transportation and pleasure to more of a child’s toy.

During the first several decades of the 1900s, it is believed that bicycle use held steady in Wisconsin, but its popularity was primarily among children. There are records of education efforts in the 1930s, including the production of a now classic bicycle safety film entitled “Bill’s Bicycle” filmed by William Stauber in Baraboo.

Bicycle use increased during World War II among both adults and children, but the sale of bicycles was restricted during the war. According to *Wisconsin Bicycle Facts* (1942), published by the Wisconsin Motor Vehicle Department, the bicycle made a bit of comeback during the war years: “The bicycle is a very useful vehicle. Youngsters run errands and pedal to and from school. One district attorney in Wisconsin has given up his car and travels to and from work on a bicycle. A new delivery bike with an oversize basket, to take the place of small truck deliveries, was displayed at the Milwaukee convention of the Wisconsin Retail Hardware Association in February, 1942. It is possible that housewives will take to the bicycle for making short shopping trips to cut down on the use of the family car.”

According to a survey taken as part of the *Wisconsin Bicycle Facts* report, police departments were involved in education efforts and seemingly satisfied with the safety literature available at the time. Police Chief Harry Mueller of Fort Atkinson stated: “If we could find some way to reach out

¹ Ballard Campbell. *The Good Roads Movement in Wisconsin, 1890-1911* (State Historical Society of Wisconsin).

² LAW became the League of American Bicyclists (LAB) in 1994.

³ In some European countries, such as Denmark and the Netherlands, vehicle miles traveled by bicycle surpassed that of autos until the early 1960s.

to the parents other than appearances in courts, we would have fewer bicycle violations.” A Green Lake County traffic officer wrote: “I am giving a series of informal talks in the schools of the county. It seems that my efforts are not in vain, because I notice that children are equipping their bikes with lights and are realizing their responsibility to others on the highway.” According to the 1942 report, an estimated 250,000 bicycles were in use within the state, and 150,000 of those were registered. The report also described what was perhaps one of first uses of bicycle lanes in Wisconsin. It states that the Police Department in the City of Two Rivers had “bicycle lanes laid out for several blocks south of the high school and bicyclists were instructed to remain in these lanes as far as possible.”

Growth in the popularity of bicycling increased during the 1950s and 1960s, as the “baby boom” generation used the bicycle as a major means of making short trips and for recreation. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the “bicycle boom” occurred as young adults, born in the 1950s and 1960s, returned to bicycling and purchased lightweight 10 speed bicycles.

Wisconsin was an early leader in recognizing the bicycle as a growing means of transportation and recreation during this time period. In response to both the bicycle boom and to the energy crisis of the early 1970s, WisDOT and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WisDNR) co-authored two reports in 1974 and 1975 entitled “Guidelines for Developing Urban Bikeways” and Guidelines of Developing Rural Bike Routes.” Although the reports did not suggest any specific policy changes, they did provide timely guidance to communities and counties experiencing considerable increases in bicycle ridership. It was also at this time that the WisDNR began its popular and extensive rails-to-trails program with the development of the Elroy-Sparta Trail. In addition, approximately 10 to 15 counties established county bicycle route systems, many of which are still in existence today. A number of bicycle paths in parks and parkways were funded and constructed using various recreational fund sources.

In the early 1970s, Wisconsin became one of the first and only states to create a position of bicycle and pedestrian safety program manager. (This position is now in WisDOT’s Bureau of Transportation Safety.) In 1976, a Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety Plan was developed by the Division of Highway Safety Coordination.

During the 1980s, WisDOT assisted the state Division of Tourism in producing and updating the Wisconsin Bicycle Escape Map (now the Wisconsin Bicycle Map printed and sold by the Bicycle Federation of Wisconsin). The map recommended a system of over 10,000 miles of bicycle routes in the state, and identified highways that were unsuitable for bicycling. The map met the overall objective of establishing at least one north-south and one east-west bicycle route in each county, and connecting each city of 10,000 people or more. However, the intended use of the map was to guide recreational bicycling. It did not recommend routes through metropolitan areas, but relied on locally published resources.

In was also during the 1980s, that WisDOT formalized a shoulder paving policy. While the main justification for this policy was lower maintenance and improved safety for motorists, paved shoulders on state highways also became a popular improvement for bicyclists. Also popular among bicyclists during this time period was the “Share the Road” campaign urging motorists and bicyclists to safely share the road. “Share the Road” bumper stickers supporting the rights of bicyclists to use roadways are still available from WisDOT.

In late 1991, the federal Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) provided significant new language regarding bicyclists. ISTEA required the consideration of bicyclists and pedestrians in the planning of highway improvements that involved the use of federal funds. In addition, all Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) and state Departments of Transportation

were required to include a bicycle and pedestrian element in their overall transportation plans.

In 1993, in response to the need for bicycle planning guidelines, WisDOT published a document entitled: *Guidelines for Metropolitan Planning Organizations and Communities in Planning and Developing Bicycle Facilities*. In January of 1994, seven new pages of standards dealing with the location and design of bicycle facilities were included in WisDOT's *Facilities Development Manual*. These standards were updated in 1997.

During 1994, most of Wisconsin's MPOs completed bicycle and pedestrian plans. In some cases, they were developed as an element of the MPO's overall transportation plan. Many of them called for specific WisDOT actions to help implement projects or programs. These plans were considered in the development of this statewide bicycle plan, especially in regard to investment, partnership, and intercity bikeway connections.

By the end of 1994, WisDOT completed its multimodal transportation plan entitled Translinks 21. While this plan included a minor element related to bicycling and walking, it focused primarily on budget recommendations for future investments. However, one of the recommendations of Translinks 21 was that WisDOT develop a comprehensive statewide bicycle plan.