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Establishing New Orleans as National Leader in Active Transportation: *Solidifying Progress, Moving Towards an Active Transportation Culture*



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Overview

Research in this brief by the Pedestrian Bicycle Resource Initiative (PBRI) at the University of New Orleans highlights the growing use of active transportation in New Orleans and the potential to solidify these gains through a process of culture change that makes active transportation an integral element in the overall transportation system. New Orleans is currently a regional leader in active transportation with a high national ranking in active transportation commute mode shares. While these rankings are promising, New Orleans lacks a clear, institutionalized system for integrating active transportation into the overall transportation decision-making structure. The process of solidifying and institutionalizing active transportation requires a paradigm shift in the basic pattern of business as usual transportation practices. This research brief highlights examples of how to effectively manage this culture change process.

Building Facilities/Building Use

New Orleans has undergone a tremendous growth in bicycle facilities over the last 5 years (Figures 1 and 2). Bicycle facilities in New Orleans have grown from just under 5 miles of facilities in 2005 to just under 50 miles in 2011. This tremendous growth has facilitated solid growth in active transportation use.

Analysis of the American Community Survey highlights these positive trends with New Orleans ranking 12th in the country in terms of bicycle commute mode share (ACS 2010). New Orleans also was recently designated as a Bicycle Friendly Community with a bronze rating from the League of American Bicyclists. These positive developments appear to be beginning to be institutionalized with a complete streets ordinance currently up for passage by the New Orleans City Council. This ordinance calls for all road projects to include consideration for walking, bicycling, and auto use.

Figure 1: New Orleans Bicycle Facilities 2005

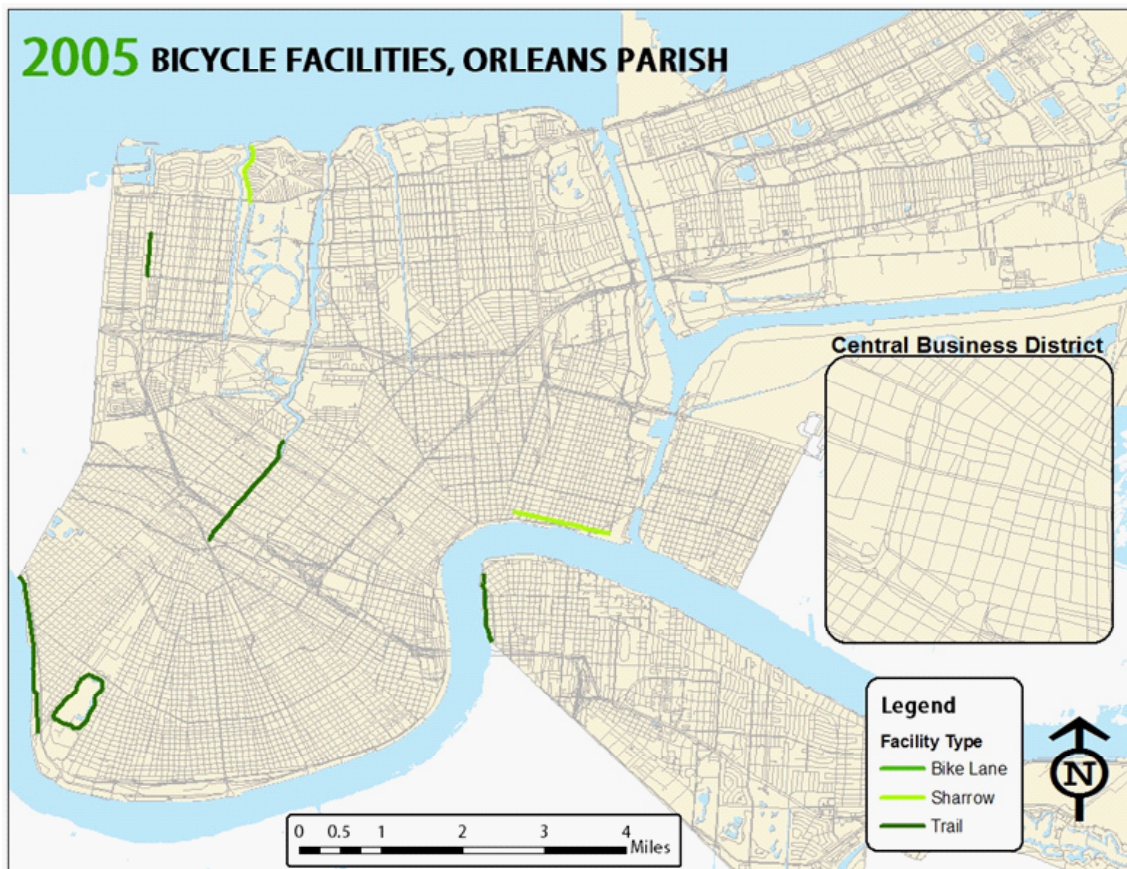
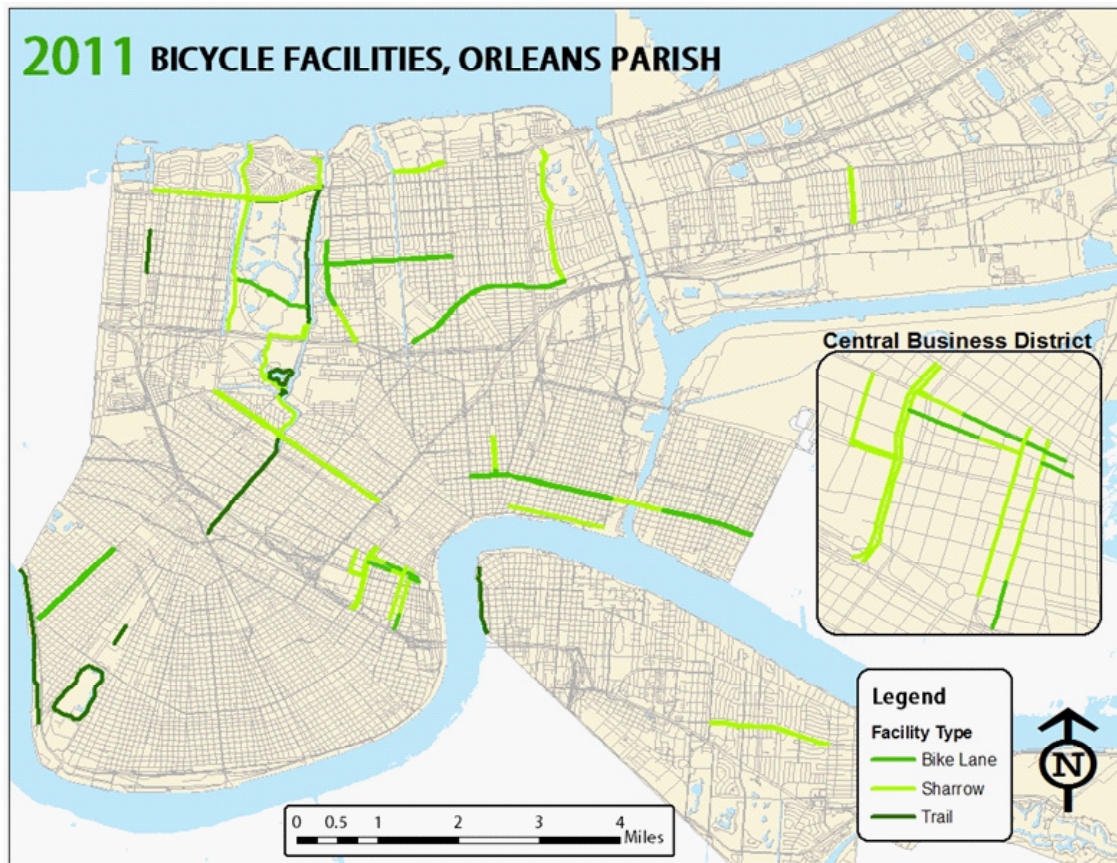


Figure 2: New Orleans Bicycle Facilities 2011



These positive trends are reflected in the actual active transportation use data collected from the Pedestrian/Bicycle Resource Initiative (PBRI). PBRI tracked bicycle and pedestrian use at 17 locations around New Orleans in 2010 and 2011. Daily bicycle use in 2011 at count sites was up 20% from 2010. Daily pedestrian use at count locations has remained fairly stable with an increase of 1%.

The largest gains in bicycle use were seen in locations with new bicycle infrastructure. Gateways between the CBD and Uptown where considerable investment in active transportation infrastructure have been made had the largest increases in bicycle use.

Counts along the Pontchartrain Expressway showed the largest bicycle count increases in 2011 with bicycle traffic increases of:

- 70% at Simon Bolivar
- 66% at Magazine
- 42% at Camp St
- 31% at Carondelet
- 12% at St. Charles Ave.

Bicycling also represents a fairly large percentage of all traffic that flows through these gateways to the CBD. PBRI research staff compared Average Daily Traffic figures for automobiles from the Regional Planning Commission to active transportation count data acquired during the count study. The Camp and Pontchartrain Expressway gateway to the CBD had an active transportation mode share of 23%. The Magazine gateway had the next highest active transportation mode share at 12%. This was followed by the St. Charles and Simon Bolivar gateways with active transportation mode shares around 8%.

Phrased differently:

- 23% of all traffic entering the CBD on Camp Street from Uptown was estimated to be bicyclists and pedestrians.
- 12% of all traffic entering the CBD through the Magazine gateway was estimated to be bicyclists and pedestrians.
- 8% of all traffic entering the CBD through the St. Charles and Simon Bolivar gateways was estimated to be bicyclists and pedestrians.

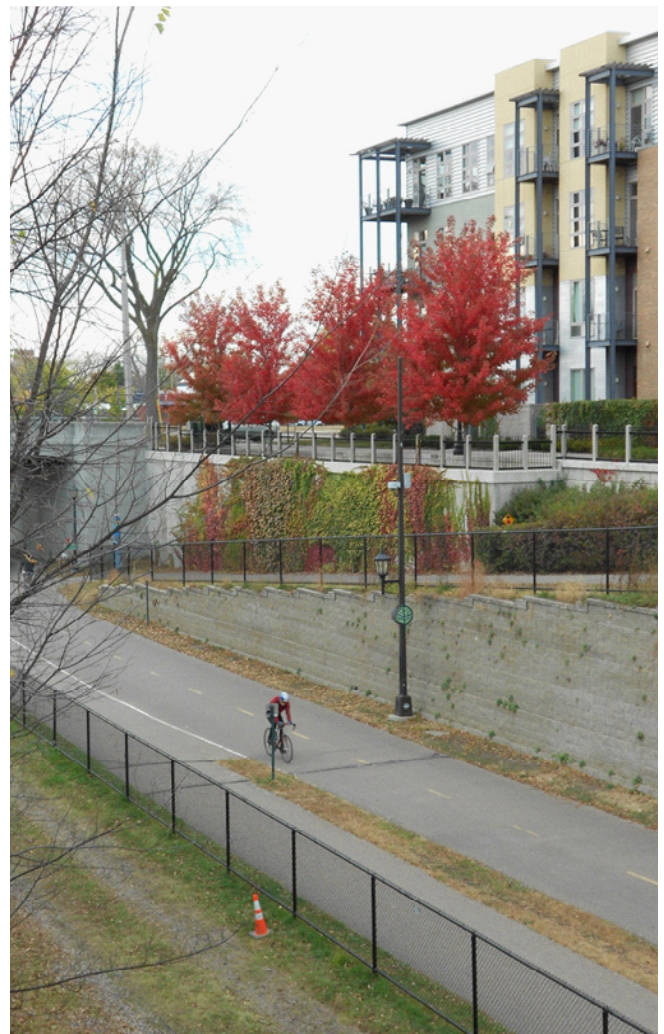
Sustaining the Momentum: Creating an Active Transportation Culture

While New Orleans has experienced tremendous growth in active transportation use, it still lags behind national leaders such as Portland and Minneapolis. While New Orleans had a walking and bicycling mode share of 6.8% in 2010, Portland's share was 11% and Minneapolis' was 10.5%. Interestingly, the difference between the New Orleans' mode share and that in Portland and Minneapolis can be explained mostly by the lower number of bicycle commuters in New Orleans. Minneapolis, Portland, and New Orleans all had comparable walking shares of ranging from 5% for Portland and New Orleans to 7% in Minneapolis. The difference between the national mode share leaders and New Orleans is that New Orleans had a much lower bicycling mode share (1.8%) compared to Portland (6.0%) and Minneapolis (3.5%).

To take the next step to become one of the national leaders, New Orleans needs to undergo a fundamental shift in the way that transportation projects are conceptualized and delivered. The perception of active transportation needs be transformed from being seen as an extra amenity to instead being conceptualized as an integral element of transportation system. The Complete Streets ordinance provides the political impetus to make these changes, but still leaves a fair amount of leeway in terms of implementation. Analysis of the experience from Minneapolis by PBRI shows how some of these key changes can be institutionalized.

While Minneapolis has a rich heritage of off-road trails and has now been designated as the number one bicycle community in America by Bicycling Magazine, the city has only recently begun to focus on on-road cyclist connections. In the 1970s, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board paved the Grand Round Trail around the perimeter of the city creating a solid network of trails connecting the numerous lakes and rivers of the area (Pflaum 2011). After the passage of ISTEA in 1991, the iconic Stone Arch Bridge was refurbished and outfitted with a trail making it the first Transportation Enhancements project in the country. This legacy of off-road trails continues today with the Midtown Greenway and connections that carry thousands of cyclists a day during the temperate months (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Minneapolis Midtown Greenway



While Minneapolis created an extensive network of off-road trails as the backbone of its system, recent work from the federal Nonmotorized Transportation Pilot Program has focused on creating a stronger on-road system (Figure 4). From the 2000 to 2009, bicycle facility miles in Minneapolis grew from 95 to 128 miles. During the same period of time, commute mode share for bicyclists grew from 1.8% (approximately where New Orleans is now) to 3.8% (Pflaum 2011). This doubling of the commute mode share for bicycling in under 10 years shows the potential of focusing on extending the connections between trails and on-road bicycle facilities.

These efforts to focus on the on-road system have, however, created tension as the traditional Public Works Department culture of maximizing throughput for automobiles has been challenged by active transportation planners and advocates seeking a more balanced system. This process of culture change, while still ongoing in Minneapolis, has yielded some valuable lessons that can help guide the New Orleans efforts.

Figure 4: Minneapolis On-Road Bike Facilities



Recent analysis of the Minneapolis Transportation Pilot Program has uncovered valuable lessons about what culture change means and how to institutionalize active transportation as a mainstream function of transportation departments. Culture change for active transportation involves two overarching components. First, transportation agencies must move from a purely auto-focused system to a multi-modal system that plans for use by new design users of the system (pedestrians and bicyclists). Underlying this large systems change is a change in the everyday practices of transportation agencies, really a change in the culture of the agencies. At the same time, users of the transportation system more generally need to begin to shift to a more multi-modal expectation about who can and should legitimately be using street space. These changes, however, often bring tension. Effective management of the tensions associated with the culture change process at both the agency and community level is a key component of moving a community towards widespread acceptance and use of active transportation.

Minneapolis is in the process of dealing with three underlying tensions that are at the core of active transportation culture change process. These underlying tensions are:

1. Tension between innovation and risk avoidance in the transportation engineering profession: Before a new active transportation treatment is implemented, it must first be “proven” through rigorous study. Status quo, auto-oriented practices, however, are not held to the same standard because they are they are deemed to be the “proven” technology. The result is a significant bias towards continuing the status quo auto-oriented practices. Auto-oriented practices act as the default agency position until they are actively dislodged. This creates a culture where innovation for active transportation is not valued. Changing these perceptions is a key component of moving a community forward to a more balanced transportation system.
2. Tension between an outside non-profit agency/advocates and Department of Public Works: most culture change exercises have the buy-in of the internal management of the organization. The goal of culture change emerges from management discussions and is then “applied” through internal leadership channels. In the Minneapolis case, the administration agent of the Pilot program was an outside, non-profit advocacy organization (Transit for Livable Communities). The challenge in this case was not just understanding the change processes within an internal management structure of a transportation agency, but also the dynamic impacts of an organizational change process led through the intervention of a new organization into the decision process. Identifying key “change agents” and fostering leadership within the Department of Transportation were key issues. This is equally true in New Orleans where advocates seek change agents within the existing agency structure.
3. Tension between internal culture change within an organization and the wider acceptance of change with the public at large: Changing the internal processes within a transportation agency is the first step of building a supportive environment for active transportation. Culture change for active transportation involves both the transportation organizations and the general public. The Minneapolis experience has shown that increased bicycle use has resulted in a growing acceptance by drivers of cyclists. This growing awareness of bicyclists appears to be decreasing tensions between drivers and cyclists and increasing safety. Creating dedicated spaces for cyclists builds acceptance and decreases conflicts.

Action Implications: Moving Towards National Leadership

Creating a supportive environment for active transportation in New Orleans will require addressing many of the same tensions. New Orleans needs to create a culture of innovation at the Department of Public Works that institutionalizes the complete streets philosophy into everyday practices. This is a significant change in the existing transportation engineering culture that must be managed through internal leadership at the department and encouraged through partnerships with other agencies such as the Regional Planning Commission and through stronger citizen engagement and oversight like the City Council Transportation Committee’s Sustainable Transportation Advisory Committee. All of this builds to changing the culture on the streets of New Orleans from an adversarial “battle” between bicyclists, pedestrians, and drivers to an acceptance of all users to lawfully and safely utilize the public streets. The Minneapolis experience shows how the culture can change over time and lead to institutionalized practices within agencies that result in a growing tolerance on city streets. This is what being a national leader looks like. New Orleans, with a strong push, has the potential to be such a community.