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Boston Tries to Shed Longtime Reputation as Cyclists' Minefield

By [KATIE ZEZIMA](#)

BOSTON — In a city known for its aggressive drivers, flummoxing street layout, confusing rotaries and overall rudeness on the road, what is a cyclist to do?

Start pedaling, some say.

Boston, long known as a minefield for bicycle riders, is feverishly working to shed that reputation by creating bike lanes, installing bike racks, restoring bike paths and urging residents to switch from horsepower to pedal power. Plans to link the city's existing bike paths and create a bike-share program are also in the works. One already exists for city employees.

“The grand plan is to change the culture, which is an incredible task,” said Nicole Freedman, a former Olympic cyclist who was hired as the city’s “bike czar” in 2007.

This is not the first time Boston — which offers a stark contrast to its bicycle-friendly neighbor, Cambridge — has tried to be more accommodating to cyclists. The city government hired a bike consultant in the late 1990s, only to eliminate the position two years later. The move was cited by *Bicycling Magazine*, which named Boston one of the nation’s “Worst Biking Cities” three times from 1999 to 2006.

But about four years ago, Mayor [Thomas M. Menino](#) got on a bike for the first time in decades. He was quickly hooked, and decided to share his new hobby with the masses. In 2005, Mr. Menino started [Hub on Wheels](#), an annual cycling event, and vowed to make Boston a biking destination.

“We want to encourage people to ride in the city,” said Mr. Menino, who rides a Globe hybrid bicycle for about 50 minutes around his neighborhood each morning, starting at 5 a.m.

The first step, Ms. Freedman said, was to attract recreational cyclists who were nervous about riding on city streets and to solicit ideas from the city’s cycling community. The city surveyed residents to find the neighborhoods where many bicycle riders live (Jamaica Plain had the most in the survey) and had engineers look at city streets to see where bike lanes or protected bike areas would work.

Even some of Boston’s largest streets barely make the 40-foot width necessary to include a bike lane, so the city must experiment with different types of bike accommodations, including shared bus and bike lanes and protected bike lanes.

Since 2007, the city has installed four miles of bike lanes, with plans for an additional five to 10 more miles by the end of this year. Also by year’s end, there will be 500 new bike racks scattered throughout Boston. The city also plans to work with the State Department of Conservation and Recreation to repave trails along the Charles River and to link them to the Emerald Necklace area, completing [Frederick Law Olmsted](#)’s view of an integrated park system.

“We firmly believe if you provide a really safe, healthy environment, people will bike,” Ms. Freedman said. The city is also establishing educational programs on bike riding and bike safety.

City and state officials are also backing up their efforts to turn Boston into a bike-friendly city with a crackdown on bad behavior against cyclists. The legislature recently passed a law holding drivers liable if they open a car door in the path of an approaching cyclist and injure a cyclist. And the City Council is considering a fine for motorists who park in bike lanes. There are few legal penalties — at least so far — for cyclists who ride recklessly and do not obey traffic signals. But Ms. Freedman said city officials hoped more bike lanes would lead to more riders’ and drivers’ following the rules.

“Bike lanes will give cyclists a legitimate place to be, and behavior will improve,” she said.

On a recent Tuesday morning, Ms. Freedman rode in a newly installed bike lane from Kenmore Square part of the way up Commonwealth Avenue, through the [Boston University](#) campus. The ride was smooth and problem-free until the intersection of Commonwealth Avenue and Carlton Street, a notorious choke point for drivers looking to get onto Storrow Drive or the Boston University Bridge, which leads to Cambridge.

The traffic was thick. The bike riders were stopping and starting. Many just got out of the bike lane and rode on the sidewalk. A sign is needed, Ms. Freedman said, to get cyclists to loop around a side street to avoid the traffic.

“Do we have problems? Yes,” Mr. Menino said. “We’re an older city. Most of our roads were cow paths.”

David Watson, executive director of MassBike, an advocacy organization, said change in Boston, particularly in the number of miles of bike lanes put in each year, is slow compared with improvements in other cities. “I think on balance we’re moving in a positive direction,” Mr. Watson said. “During my commute in peak travel times, I’m running into bike traffic jams that are stacking up six to eight deep at lights, and that’s something three years ago I was never seeing.”

But some of the changes are lost on riders like Eric Fernald, 49, a researcher from Belmont, Mass., who rides to his office each day.

“I don’t see any bike racks,” said Mr. Fernald, who rides along the Charles River and tries to cycle on as few city streets as possible during his commute to an office near South Station, preferring to ride through Boston Common, which has no traffic. “Since I know of no bike-friendly roads, I try to avoid them completely.”

Chris Ditunno, who founded Allston-Brighton Bikes, a community organization, and who sits on the mayor’s Bicycle Advisory Committee, said that while some in the biking community are reserving judgment on the changes for now, others are thrilled at the new focus on biking.

“I think with Nicole’s arrival there’s a new energy and infusion of effort to make a really wonderful improvement and really change things around,” Mr. Ditunno said of Ms. Freedman.

Even *Bicycling Magazine* is cutting Boston some slack, putting it on last year’s “Five for the Future” list.

“They’re coming from a more holistic standpoint,” said Loren Mooney, the magazine’s editor in chief. “The lines of communication are open, and they’re working more closely with advocacy groups. But instead of thinking of just serious cyclists, they’re going at it for improving life for everybody, and that’s a critical change.”