

Boston Globe article

HOUSES HAWKED ON BIKEWAY

Author(s): James Vaznis, GLOBE STAFF Date: November 6, 2005 Page: 9 Section: Globe West

Forget about putting the house "For Sale" sign on the front lawn.

For Carolyn Barmeier and Myron Davis, the decision was easy: Plant the sign in the backyard. The Lexington couple lives at 23 Byron Ave., along the Minuteman Bikeway, which, with 2 million users annually, is the nation's second most traveled recreational trail. That's a lot of potential buyers.

"We live in a cul de sac," said Barmeier. "We get more traffic on the bike path than the street in front of our house."

As the Greater Boston housing market shows signs of cooling from its red-hot sales of recent years, homeowners are capitalizing on any asset to give their property an edge. For many homeowners in Arlington, Lexington, and Bedford, they are turning to the Minuteman Bikeway.

Marketing properties as being near the bike path has long been a tradition in newspaper real estate ads and trade listings, but placing for-sale signs where they are visible from the path is a fairly new practice in Lexington, real estate agents say, although it's more established in Arlington.

"I think it's been more prevalent since February or March of this year" in Lexington, said Charla Coleman, a realtor with Carlson GMAC Real Estate, whose Lexington offices are steps away from the Minuteman Bikeway. "It's a great additional way to market a house. It gives prospective buyers a different perspective. It's a great way to bring new life to those houses."

The 11-mile trail starts at the Alewife MBTA station in Cambridge and weaves through Arlington and Lexington centers, past several ponds and meadows, and behind oodles of houses and condominiums, before ending in Bedford. Many of those houses have gates to the path providing homeowners with a "green driveway" to America's new Main Street, one that is free of motors and filled with bicyclists, in-line skaters, and joggers pushing baby carriages.

Like popular highways in the area, such as Route 128 and Route 2, at rush hour, the Minuteman Bikeway is jammed with users in the late afternoons and early evenings. Walkers and bicyclists bump into friends on the path, and catch up on gossip. Many others use it to get to and from work. Larry Andersen, who lives near the bike path in Arlington, hops on his bicycle 10 months a year to get to his job as a video editor on Newbury Street in Boston.

"It's a nice way to beat the traffic," he said. "In the morning, it's peaceful. In the

afternoon, it can be crowded with bikes and rollerbladers. It gets a little clogged in Lexington and Arlington centers."

Andersen said he can remember when the path was first proposed in the 1980s, and how many homeowners along the path tried to stop its construction along an abandoned railroad corridor.

"People were objecting to it being in their backyard," he said. "They felt it wouldn't be policed well, and unsavory types would hang out there."

But the path, which is mostly in Arlington and Lexington, has seen little crime. The most notable event in recent years occurred in the fall of 2001, when Arlington police beefed up patrols along the path and urged women not to walk there alone after receiving reports of a rash of indecent assaults against women between 4 and 6 p.m. weekdays.

Arlington police Captain John Serson said it's highly unusual for a major crime to take place on the path. He said the department occasionally fields complaints about people exposing themselves in front of bicyclists or joggers.

"As a cynical old man, it surprises me how little crime there is," Serson said.

In Lexington, police and medical workers mostly respond to calls of injuries sustained during bicycle or skating collisions, said police Lieutenant Michael O'Connell.

Being on or near the Minuteman Bikeway can increase the value of a home by 4 or 5 percent, said Brian Greeley, a realtor with Bowes GMAC in Arlington.

"The old saying in real estate is location, location, location," Greeley said. "The path is one of the crown jewels in the area. We're in an age where physical fitness is a high priority. Having access to a bike path is analogous to years ago of having a house across from a park or playground."

Owners of homes and condominiums in Arlington and Cambridge were the first to start marketing property sales along the path, beginning not long after the trail opened in 1992, according to interviews with real estate agents and local government officials there. Those areas are more densely populated, with several large condominium and apartment buildings along or near the path.

Even homeowners who live off the path, but nearby, will advertise open houses on the path, followed by a series of signs with arrows that eventually lead users off the path and to the front door.

"The signs are kind of a frequent occurrence," said Jack Johnson, chairman of the Arlington Bicycle Advisory Committee, which is appointed by the selectmen to oversee

the trail. "If you're looking to sell property fast, you use everything you've got."

In Lexington, where the trail is more of a countryside tour, for-sale signs have just started being used with regularity this year. Barmeier and Davis, whose house is on Byron Avenue in Lexington, got the idea of placing a sign near the bike path one day this summer while clipping hedges and mowing their backyard lawn.

"We heard someone ride by and heard them say to someone else, 'This is such a great area. It would be a great place to buy a house,'" Barmeier recalled.

At the time, the couple was thinking about selling the house because of Davis's job possibly relocating him to Colorado. A couple of months later, he got the job, and up went the sign in front of their backyard fence.

The appearance of for-sale signs along the Minuteman Bikeway is not unique. Signs are going up on other paths across the county, but it's not known how widespread the practice is because nobody tracks the information, said Katie Magers, a spokeswoman for the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, a nonprofit organization in Washington, D.C., that promotes rail trail construction.

Magers said she uses the W&OD Railroad Trail in the Arlington, Va., area, and occasionally sees house-for-sale signs there. The trail is the most popular in the nation, drawing 3 million users annually.

"I guess it's an easy way to house shop," she said. "Since so many people use the trail, it makes sense."

The growing number of for-sale signs along the Minuteman Bikeway is raising concerns in Lexington that it might detract from the natural beauty of the area. Stewart Kennedy, chairman of the Lexington Bicycle Advisory Committee, wrote a letter to selectmen this year about for-sale signs cropping up on the path. A couple of signs this spring were placed in the right of way, near the path's pavement, which is forbidden.

Kennedy, however, said selectmen are not considering any zoning changes that would prevent homeowners from advertising house sales on their property.

"It's like a ride through the country, even in the town center a commercial zone you see trees and the back of houses," Kennedy said. "We don't want it to look like an advertising or commercial district. It would be like riding down Route 1 in Saugus."

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