

# Can Massachusetts be a bike mecca?

By David Riley

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Cyclists offer all these reasons and more to explain why their ranks are growing steadily in Massachusetts. By just one measure, the number of Bay State commuters who mainly biked to work spiked 80 percent

Gas prices are sky high and it beats idling in gridlock. Both the planet and our bodies deserve better than motoring from every Point A to every Point B.

Last but not least, it's fun.

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## MECCA

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from 2000 to 2011, from roughly 12,300 people to 22,200, according to U.S. Census Bureau estimates.

The rise has been rapid in a handful of cities - Cambridge estimated there were three times as many people biking on its streets last year compared to 2002.

Add people who bike mostly for fun or fitness and the numbers soar. About 688,000 people in Massachusetts biked more than once in 2011, according to estimates by the National Sporting Goods Association. That's about one in 10 state residents.

Also climbing now: The number of state and local leaders who say they want to build on this trend as an alternative to congested roads and streets originally built mainly for cars.

In a recent sign of this shift, the state Department of Transportation (MassDOT) announced last fall it aims to triple travel by biking, walking and public transit by 2030. It's not about just accommodating people who bicycle for fun, but recognizing bikes as a form of transportation, said Catherine Cagle, manager of sustainable transportation at MassDOT.

"We want more of them," she said.

But to get more people cycling on a larger scale across eastern Massachusetts, it could take time, more infrastructure and more concentrated efforts to educate people about

rules of the road, say transportation advocates and planners.

Advocates credit the recent expansion of bike lanes, paths and places to lock up bikes in part for the growth of cycling, making it more convenient and safer for more people to hop behind the handlebars.

For example, in the 101 towns and cities served by the Metropolitan Area Planning Commission, there are now about 103 miles of striped bike lanes, 43 miles of shared lane markings and 67 miles of shared-use paths, according to the commission.

"When you build it, they come," said Jason Schrieber, a principal at Nelson/Nygaard Consulting Associates, a planning firm that specializes in bicycle and pedestrian plans. "Embracing cycling is not a hurdle for most people - they've been doing it since they were five. It's just that we never really gave them the environment to do it safely, until now."

Cyclists also credit bike-friendly shifts in public attitudes and values. More people - especially younger generations - are moving to more urban areas and seeking healthier, greener and simpler ways to get around, and more leaders are embracing that shift.

Much of the growth of cycling has not been among the stereotypical, spandex-clad crowd, said David Watson, executive director of the Massachusetts Bicycle Coalition, or MassBike.

"They're just regular people, very often riding

## Rules for bikes

State law says bicycles "shall have the right to use all public ways in the commonwealth," except for highways where signs are posted specifically prohibiting bikes. They also "shall be subject to the traffic laws and regulations of the commonwealth."

That means bikes have as much right to be in most travel lanes as cars and trucks. Most of the same traffic rules apply to cyclists, including obeying traffic signals and signs.

There are a few special rules - for example, cyclists may ride on sidewalks outside business districts if necessary, should signal stops or turns by hand if possible to do so safely and may pass cars on the right, the law says.

Cyclists also may ride two abreast, but must allow any traffic to pass. Front and rear lights and reflectors either on the pedals or worn on the rider's ankles are required for travel within a half-hour after sunset and a half-hour before sunrise.

Helmets are required for anyone 16 or younger.

inexpensive bikes, wearing regular clothes, just to get around," he said.

But cycling's growth has been uneven. In Bristol, Norfolk, Plymouth and Worcester counties, there are fewer bike commuters than the state average.

Beyond Boston and nearby communities, bike infrastructure can be scarce or disconnected from other lanes, trails or common routes. More towns and cities are embracing lofty goals for bikeable, walkable streets on paper, but this doesn't always yield results on the ground.

The next ring of communities outside Boston - including suburbs and other cities - will need to catch up, said Steve Miller, executive director of the New England Healthy Weight Initiative at Harvard School of Public Health and a board member at the Livable Streets Alliance, where he writes a transit blog, "The Public Way."

"Bicycling is going to be one of those lifestyle harbingers of future economic growth," he said.

Many advocates also see room to improve safety as more bikes hit the streets.

Statistics from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration show 39 cyclists died on Bay State roads from 2007 to 2011 - roughly 2 percent of all crash deaths combined for those years. Seven deaths occurred in Boston, with the rest distributed throughout the state.

A more recent case illustrated what many cyclists viewed as a failure to recognize their legal right to share the road. A grand jury in February decided not to indict a truck driver, Dana McCoomb, whom police say struck and killed cyclist Alexander Motsenigos in a hit-and-run in Wellesley last summer. At the time, MassBike condemned the decision.

Police departments also reported to MassDOT that more than 2,100 people riding bikes suffered non-fatal injuries in crashes from 2007 to 2010, though the count is inexact and does not include most crashes in

## Rules for cars

Motorists must pass cyclists "at a safe distance and at a reasonable and proper speed," state law says. If a driver can't safely pass a bike in the same lane, he or she must use another lane or wait until a safe chance to pass.

Drivers also are required to check for bikes and pedestrians before opening a car or truck door. Violations may be punished by a fine of no more than \$100.

When taking left turns, drivers must yield to oncoming traffic, including bikes on the right of other approaching vehicles, the law says.

Similarly, drivers are not supposed to turn right across the path of a cyclist "unless the turn can be made at a safe distance from the bicyclist at a speed that is reasonable and proper."

Boston. And while many cyclists say tensions with drivers are rare, they do arise - in a recent example, Cambridge police in February charged a Lowell man with assault after he allegedly got out of his car and slapped a man on a bike in the face.

In part, cyclists are aiming for more safety in numbers - in some U.S. cities, overall bike crash rates have declined as more people pedaled. At MassBike, Watson favors more public education on sharing the road, but most of all, more regular bike education in schools.

"If we want to make the real shift, where people are instinctively looking for bicyclists and thinking about the safety of all the different users of the road, we really need to start with the kids," he said.

MassBike also backs legislation this year aimed at safety, including a bill to stiffen fines and require traffic safety training for drivers who harm, threaten or assault cyclists, as well as

pedestrians, skaters and other so-called "vulnerable road users."

Another bill backed by a coalition of public health and transit groups this year would provide new financial perks to towns that adopt bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly street standards.

As state and local leaders look to fill gaps in the region's cycling infrastructure and make other improvements, Boston Bikes Director Nicole Freedman noted her city was once rated among the worst in the U.S. for bicycling.

Since 2007, it has added 60 miles of bike lanes, launched the Hubway bike-sharing program and made other strides.

"Five years later, we're one of the top cycling cities in the country, in a city that has narrow, tight streets and has winter," Freedman said. "That really says: Look, it's doable anywhere."

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