

## Commuting by cycling gets a push

**Seasoned cyclists give advice to workers who want to bank bucks and trim fat.**

By MIKE BRASSFIELD

Published May 7, 2007

---

Bicycle to work?

In Florida?

Are you nuts?

That's a reaction every bike-riding commuter has heard sometime. Still, a new campaign called Tampa BayCycle is trying to get 1, 000 people in Pinellas and Hillsborough counties to pedal to work at least once during May, which is National Bike Month.

Organizers are building an army of bicycle ambassadors on both sides of Tampa Bay - they have 93 so far - to recruit others from beyond the circle of hard-core biking fanatics.

The goal is to get more people to view their bikes as a useful mode of transportation rather than just an exercise toy.

"If you work 3 to 5 miles away from your house, you could be biking to your job," says longtime bicycle commuter Alan Snel of Tampa. "You'll save money. You'll feel better. You just have to give it a try."

A surprising number of people - more than 10, 000, according to the U.S. Census - regularly commute by bike in Hillsborough and Pinellas counties. Many will tell you it's environmentally sound, economically thrifty and great for health and fitness. Others do it because they have to; they can't afford a car.

St. Petersburg attorney Bob Burguieres bikes to work once or twice a week from his Seminole home, a 14.2-mile one-way trek that takes him anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour, depending on which way the wind blows.

Burguieres, 47, encourages others to do the same, especially now that gas prices are pushing \$3 a gallon. He also makes it a point to remind motorists and cyclists alike to obey the rules of the road and watch out for each other.

"I've come close twice to meeting my maker because of inattentive drivers," he said.

\* \* \*

What a difference a decade makes. Ten years ago, two public-interest groups in Washington, D.C., labeled the Tampa Bay area as the most dangerous metropolitan area in America in which to ride a bike.

Fast-forward to this May, when the League of American Bicyclists will present St. Petersburg with an award for being a "bicycle-friendly community."

What happened?

A five-year project called CityTrails which, among other things, increased the city's bike lanes from 10 miles in 1993 to nearly 50 miles today and an expected 93 miles next year, said St. Petersburg bicycle coordinator Cheryl Stacks.

Tampa is way behind St. Petersburg on this front, cyclists say. Hillsborough's most bike-friendly areas are around USF and the northwestern suburbs around the Upper Tampa Bay Trail.

But bike lanes are being added to Nebraska Avenue and to Tampa and Jackson streets downtown by this summer, said Gena Torres, bicycle coordinator for the Hillsborough Metropolitan Planning Organization.

"We need more," she said. "The people getting hurt on bikes out there are hard-working, blue-collar people. They're cleaning hotel rooms, serving food, working at Jiffy Lube. They're on bikes because they can't afford gas."

About 3 percent of Florida traffic deaths are bicycle fatalities. Between 2001 and 2005, there was an annual average of eight bicycle deaths in Pinellas, nine in Hillsborough, three in Pasco, and one each in Citrus and Hernando counties.

Of the 119 Floridians who died while bicycling in 2005, 90 percent weren't wearing helmets, according to the Florida Highway Patrol.

\* \* \*

Other plans are afoot to open up the Tampa Bay area to bicycles.

In December, the Florida Department of Transportation awarded local officials \$400,000 to study the feasibility of and do the preliminary engineering work for a trail for cyclists, runners and walkers along the Courtney Campbell Parkway.

And during the next decade or so, there are plans to link the 34-mile Pinellas Trail, popular with cyclists, with an eastern loop to complete a 75-mile circle around Pinellas County that will also connect to the Friendship Trail on the old Gandy Bridge.

As it is, 60 to 70 percent of people on the Pinellas Trail are using it not for recreation but to get to work, school or shopping, said Bert Valery Jr. of Indian Rocks Beach, who pushed to get the trail built.

Valery, who rides a half-mile to his insurance agency, became a bicycle safety advocate in 1983 after his teenage son was killed by a car while bicycling.

Census figures in 2000 showed that 7,279 people in Pinellas and 3,731 in Hillsborough usually commuted to work by bicycle.

Of course, that's still a tiny percentage of all travelers. But when gas prices hit \$3 a gallon last summer, local bike commuters saw a surge in other people riding to work.

Now that local gas prices have crept back up to near \$2.90, they're starting to seeing more riders again.

Mike Brassfield can be reached at 813 226-3435 or [brassfield@sptimes.com](mailto:brassfield@sptimes.com).

#### **Fast Facts:**

#### **2007 Bike Month activities**

The contest: Individual riders and businesses can sign up and log their miles on Tampa BayCycle's campaign's Web site, [www.tampabaycycle.com](http://www.tampabaycycle.com), to be eligible to win prizes.

The site also has a schedule of cycling events, including group rides during Bike to Work Week, May 14-18.

May 16 ride: A 12-mile ride from downtown Dunedin to Honeymoon Island State Park is planned from 6 to 8 p.m. May 16. Riders should meet at the Dunedin Historical Society, 349 Main St.

#### **Tips for biking**

Thinking of giving it a try? Before you pull that bike out the garage and head to work, read this advice from seasoned bike commuters:

- Gear up. Wear a helmet and equip your bike with lights.
- Ride on the street instead of the sidewalk. It's actually safer, they say, because most bicycle accidents happen when drivers turn off a road and don't see a cyclist on a sidewalk. Use the street unless you're not confident on a busy or narrow stretch of road. Also, ride with the flow of traffic, not against it.
- Plan ahead. Map out your route ahead of time. Try to find streets that have bike lanes or at least a shoulder. "Try it on a weekend when there's not going to be a lot of traffic," said Nick Griffiths of New Tampa, who bikes 10 miles to his research job at H. Lee Moffitt Cancer Center. St. Petersburg is working on creating a "bicycling suitability map" to help, similar to the one created by Hillsborough County.
- Wash up. "If your employer wants to support cycling, you need a shower. It's humid outside here," said Julie Bond, who pedals to work at the Center for Urban Transportation Research at USF. Other riders scout out health clubs or YMCAs near work. Still others make do with sinks, bathroom stalls and alcohol wipes, but that's obviously not for everyone.
- Get help. "Look to someone else who rides a bike and get advice," said Bond. That's why she's helping to spearhead Tampa BayCycle, which seeks to recruit 100 cyclists who will encourage at least five friends, neighbors or co-workers to try two-wheel travel.

#### **By the numbers**

**1,000** Hoped for participants in the Tampa BayCycle campaign, designed to get people in Pinellas and Hillsborough counties to try pedaling to work at least once in May.

**50** Miles of bike lanes in St. Petersburg today.

**93** Miles of bike lanes in St. Petersburg by the end of next year.

90 Percentage of the 119 Florida cyclists who died in 2005 who weren't wearing helmets.

---

© 2007 • All Rights Reserved • St. Petersburg Times  
490 First Avenue South • St. Petersburg, FL 33701 • 727-893-8111  
[Contact the Times](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Standard of Accuracy](#) | [Terms, Conditions & Copyright](#)