

County Planning Board backs Lake Norman bike route

by: Sarah Melton
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The Lincoln County Planning Board has endorsed a bicycle route around Lake Norman that seems to be drawing skepticism from some local commissioners.

Bjorn Hansen, transportation planner with the Centralina Council of Governments (CCOG), presented the Lake Norman Regional Bicycle Plan to the Planning Board and County Commissioners Monday.

The N.C. Department of Transportation (DOT) has contracted with CCOG to develop the route surrounding Lake Norman through Mecklenburg, Iredell, Catawba and Lincoln counties.

The route will feature a combination of on- and off-road facilities, including multi-purpose paths, striped bicycle lanes and wide outside lanes for the "design bicyclist," a person who is comfortable riding a bicycle near traffic on roads with moderate volume. Lincoln County's segments take up about one-fourth of the 100-mile plan.

The county's initial route highlights existing roads, including 13 miles along Slanting Bridge Road from Catawba County, Campground Road, Old N.C. 16, Hagers Ferry Road, Club Drive and N.C. 73 into Mecklenburg County. The remaining 8.7 miles is a loop leaving east from N.C. 16 on Webbs Road and following Burton Lane, Blades Trail, and Lake Shore Road back to N.C. 16.

In addition to the initial route, the plan has an ultimate route, which combines existing roads and future sections of the Carolina Thread Trail. Approximately 16 miles of the initial route will remain in the ultimate route. An additional 9.8 miles of off-roads trail will be incorporated to give the ultimate route a total length of close to 26 miles.

The ultimate route will cross the Catawba River along N.C. 73, but recommended improvements will need to wait until the N.C. 73 bridge is replaced, which is not expected until after 2030. The ultimate route's primary corridor will run between northern and southern Lincoln County, roughly parallel to N.C. 16.

County Commissioner Bruce Carlton said the concept was great, but worried about the bikers safety on Blades Trail Road, one of the many heavily traveled and windy roads included in the route.

"I'm looking at Blades Trail and if you want to put your life in danger on a bike, that is your business, but I don't want the residents of Lincoln County feeling bad when they run over them," he said.

Lake Shore Road sparked another concern from Carlton. "It's a dangerous road," he said. "To put bicycles on it...I don't think it's a very smart idea."

Hansen understood Carlton's concerns, but later said that the roads included in the trail are already being used regularly by bicyclists. "We stopped and talked to bicyclists out there already on Lake Shore and 16 on the weekdays and weekends," he said. "These routes are here. These bicyclists are here."

After the presentation, Planning Board members met to discuss the issue and take a vote. Some Planning Board members wanted to know how many bicyclists would use the trail, but Hansen said it would be impossible to give an exact number. Census information only asks residents their primary mode of transportation to work, which means that bicyclists are underreported, he said.

"Did we go out and take clickers and count the number of bikers?" Hansen said. "No, because we would have to do so many routes and there would be no validity. We identified bike clubs and routes they already use and routes that have already been designated by municipalities with DOT."

Board member Jeff Frushtick wondered if any safety devices could be installed on the route, particularly on Lake Shore Road.

"You don't have a lot of opportunity to improve that road, but is there any way to put up (large reflecting mirrors) at the curbs so you could see approaching traffic?" he said. "Is there any consideration for this, on a road with sharp turns, to allow the drivers to see a group of bicyclists ahead or for bicyclists to see the cars coming at them?"

Hansen said state legislature recently passed a law that allows the state to consider traffic-calming devices for low-volume residential roads, which could bring some relief to drivers and bikers if incorporated in the plan. Lake Shore Road, Blades Trail and Burton Lane would be the most likely appropriate spots for traffic-calming devices, he said.

Bicyclist and board member Tom Campbell supported the plan. "I think any bicyclist will tell you it's dangerous out there and you've got to be really careful what you are doing," he said. "I commend you on your study. I think it's a very good study."

The Planning Board unanimously endorsed the plan, which go before County Commissioners Jan. 25. DOT will review the plan in March, and likely vote on it in April.

DOT has asked that all participating municipalities, counties and transportation planning organizations review the plan and consider endorsing it, but not approving it, since the plan is created for DOT.

To learn more about the Lake Norman Bicycle Regional Bicycle Plan, visit www.lakenormanrpo.org and click on "Lake Norman RBP." You can also call the Centralina Council of Governments at 704-372-2416.

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