

County OKs Bike Plan, But With Restrictions

By Ken H. Fortenberry

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Just as they did with the Carolina Thread Trails proposal, county commissioners endorsed the Lake Norman Bicycle Path Plan Monday night, but put so many conditions on it the endorsement may be questionable.

The controversial bicycle path would designate certain highways and streets in the Denver area - including busy Highway 16 - as part of a bicycle trail for what is referred to as "design cyclists."

Design cyclists are those who are "comfortable driving near traffic," according to trail supporters.

The routes will be designated and marked by the state Department of Transportation which is primarily responsible for the bike route, but commissioners learned that the county might be asked to provide matching funds for certain grants that might be necessary to fully implement the plan.

That was quickly shot down by commissioners, who were initially told the county would have no financial obligation to the bicycle route.

County Commissioners Carrol Mitchem and Bruce Carlton were the most vocal opponents to the proposal, citing safety and financial concerns.

In an attempt to convince commissioners to approve the plan, supporters and planning board members recommended putting "traffic calming" devices along Lakeshore Road in response to concerns about the trail winding along that narrow road.

The calming devices - better known as speed bumps - ran into unexpected opposition from area residents, and commissioners shot those down, too.

Mitchem wondered why the Centralina Council of Governments, the plan coordinator, is trying to force something on people who don't want it.

Residents already are burdened by traffic congestion and safety issues and they don't want another burden, he said.

"The way to get around this is to forget about this and for you go go home," he told COG's transportation coordinator Bjorn Hansen.

Carlton said that he has talked to no one who is in favor of the bicycle trail. No one wants "Spandex helmets shooting down the highway four across," he said.

Mitchem took the occasion to blast the DOT.

DOT can't fix potholes or scrape ice and snow from roadways much less maintain bicycle trails, he said.

Commissioner Arena proposed removing Lakeshore Road from the plan and installing bike trail signs only when improvements are made to the roads affected, but Mitchem quickly made a motion to reject the entire plan.

That died 2-3 with only Mitchem and Carlton agreeing to kill the plan.

Arena came back with another proposal: endorse the plan without Lakeshore Road, stipulate that no county money be used, no trails will be marked until road improvements are made, and no speed bumps. (No road improvements are currently planned by the DOT for any portion of the trail in Lincoln County).

Arena's motion on a voice vote of 3-2, but when news@norman sought to determine how individual commissioners voted, Carlton said he thought Arena's motion had failed because he voted no.

Chairman Alex Patton was surprised by Carlton's statement. He said that according to commission rules when a commissioner doesn't vote, it is recorded as a yes.

(Commissioners usually vote by voice - not by raising their hands - and it's difficult sometimes to determine how they vote, especially when they don't speak directly into their microphones.

"I thought something came out when I spoke," said Carlton, who was urged by other commissioners to bring the matter up for another vote if he wanted to revisit the issue.

Carlton said he was opposed to the bike plan, but would not ask for a new vote.

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