

Regional bike plan would link Portage transportation routes

When was the last time you rode your bike? With your kids to the local park, on a scenic ride through Portage County on one of the trails or maybe even to get to work or run an errand? Portage County has many options for bicycling that provide great recreational and transportation opportunities.

Bicycling is not only a great way to get out and experience nature and get exercise, but is also a very efficient way to get around. Bicycling is low-cost, environmentally friendly, and increases mobility for a wide variety of people. Trails and other infrastructure such as bike lanes or racks are a great amenity for Portage County residents. They also attract tourists who may eat or shop at local restaurants and stores as part of their trip, supporting local economic development.

Portage County currently has three regional trails: The Portage Hike & Bike Trail is 14 miles and connects Kent, Ravenna, and the 33.5-mile Bike and Hike Trail in Summit County. The Headwaters Trail is an eight-mile trail between Mantua and Garrettsville. The Berlin Lake Trail is a one and a half mile trail across Berlin Lake.

There are also 12 miles of mountain bike trails in West Branch State Park.

While Portage County has great start, there is still a lot of work to be completed to create an integrated bicycle network. This is exactly what AMATS, the Akron Metropolitan Area Transportation Study, is trying to do.

AMATS is a regional planning agency that plans for and helps fund transportation projects in Portage and Summit counties and a small part of Wayne County.

AMATS is working on a regional bike plan to promote bicycling as a viable transportation option and recreational amenity. The draft plan contains on-road and off-road recommendations. The on-road bike recommendations identify priority corridors for bicycle investments. The off-road recommendations show potential expansions of existing trails and propose a few new ones, such as a trail from Kent to Mogadore Reservoir.

To help cyclists in Portage County plan rides based on their comfort level and ability,

AMATS created a Bike User Map. The Bike User Map rates major area roadways on factors such as

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the amount of traffic and the posted speed limits and classifies them as suitable for a beginner, intermediate, advanced, or expert rider. The map is user-driven and will be adjusted as input is received based on users' experiences.

AMATS is also developing a website, Switching Gears, devoted to improving and supporting bicycling in the region. The website will provide community and event forums, interactive maps, information on area trails, and information on regional bicycle planning and projects. The site, switching-gears.org, is expected to go live the first week of March.

AMATS works with the Portage Park District, Metro Parks Serving Summit County, local communities, and other groups to create a regional vision and framework for bicycling, but also has approximately \$1 million per year to allocate to bicycle and pedestrian projects.

In January, AMATS funded two new bicycle projects in Portage County, each for \$700,000. A new section of The Portage Hike & Bike trail along S.R. 59 from John Brown Tannery Park to Erie Street was funded. Part of a new trail from Hiram College to S.R. 303 was also funded.

There are many ways that you can get more involved in biking in Portage County. The number one way is to pump up your bike tires and get out on the road or on one of the trails. If you would like to view or comment on the AMATS Bike Plan or the Bike User Map, available at amatsplanning.org, or have ideas for Switching Gears, please contact me at kbeniston@akronohio.gov or 330-375-2436.

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