

# Two-Wheeled Sustainability



Bicycling provides the same health, social and environmental benefits as walking, but has one big advantage over simple shoe leather—people can go much farther much faster.

By Barbara McCann

When REALTOR® Matt Kolb meets with a client to show properties in and around Boulder, Colo., they often leave the car in the parking lot and ride bicycles from house to house.

“People get a new perspective from slowing the process down,” says Kolb, “Riding through neighborhoods, they see things more like they would once they actually live in the neighborhood.”

Kolb is so excited about showing via bicycle that he and his partner established a firm for that purpose. Pedal to Properties is a full service firm, but specializes in showing homes via “cruiser” bikes—comfortable, fat-tired bicycles that are famously easy to ride. Kolb and his partner are currently looking to expand into other markets.

The firm is just one indication that bicycles are wheeling their way into the consciousness of Americans searching for ways to live more sustainably. Commercially successful bicycling innovations and changing development patterns have helped make bicycles ‘cool.’ In some areas, bikeability is as sought after as walkability.

## Shifting Gears: From Recreation to Transportation

Bicycling provides the same health, social and environmental benefits as walking, but has one big advantage over simple shoe leather—people can go much farther much faster, increasing the places they can reach without climbing into a car or waiting for the bus. A rule of thumb used by designers of transit-oriented developments is that people are willing to walk a quarter mile to reach a transit stop—maybe half a mile if they are truly motivated. In contrast, a one- or two-mile bicycle ride takes approximately the same amount of time, and



Pedal To Properties of Boulder, Colo., gives potential buyers the opportunity to travel by bicycle to prospective homes and properties.

requires less effort. (Unless there happens to be a steep hill along the way.)

For many years, bicycles have been seen primarily as a recreational vehicle. Bicycling for transportation, particularly for commuting, has been limited to two groups: Low-income workers who have no other way to reach a job, and a smaller group of usually highly-educated, high-income individuals. The latter often ride for recreation as well. For both groups, the ability to bike to work has long been a factor in deciding where to live. But the portion of all workers getting to work by bike has remained well under one percent in most cities. That percentage is starting to increase. The number of participants in Bike to Work Day events, usually held in May, has grown from the hundreds to the thousands. The Denver metropolitan region, which includes Boulder, experienced a 14 percent surge in participation last year alone, with 21,000 registered participants—7,500 of them commuting by bike for the first time. About half of Americans already live within five miles of their workplaces, a perfect distance for a bike commute.

The U.S. bicycle industry, long focused on recreation, is producing more bicycles designed for transportation and commuting. It's also shifting how it markets those bikes, taking into consideration rising gas prices and obesity rates, as well as global warming.

“The bicycle is a simple solution to some of those complex problems,” says Rebecca Anderson, Advocacy Director for the Trek Bicycle Corporation. “Forty percent of car trips are less than two miles. That is easily, clearly, a bikeable distance.”

Trek, the largest American bicycle manufacturer, is focusing on trips under two miles in its campaign, “One World, Two Wheels.” The campaign seeks to increase the percentage of short trips made by bicycle in the United States from one percent to five percent by 2017. Americans make 65 percent of their very short trips, those under a mile, in their cars. These short trips are also the most inefficient, as ‘cold starts’ burn more gasoline and emit more pollutants.

“The concept of bike use for short trips seems more prominent and more fashionable,” says Tim Blumenthal, head of the bicycle industry group, Bikes Belong. “The bike is a positive symbol of independence, freedom, spontaneity and fun. It stands for something, for making your own decision, for doing what you want when you want to do it.”

Cyclists at all levels of skill and experience are advocating for more bike-friendly cities. Lance Armstrong, noting the urban renaissance underway in his hometown of Austin, Texas, recently told the Austin-American Statesman, “This city is exploding downtown. Are all these

people in high rises going to drive everywhere? We have to promote (bike) commuting.”

The five-time Tour de France champion is in the process of opening a bicycle store in Austin. The shop will cater to commuters and everyday riders, not just racers.

### Connecting New and Existing Development

The trend toward compact development is another contributing factor to the increased popularity of bicycling. As people move into new, mixed-use developments, they can reach more of their destinations by foot. But decades of spread-out development mean many destinations remain too far for an easy walk, and transit service may still be

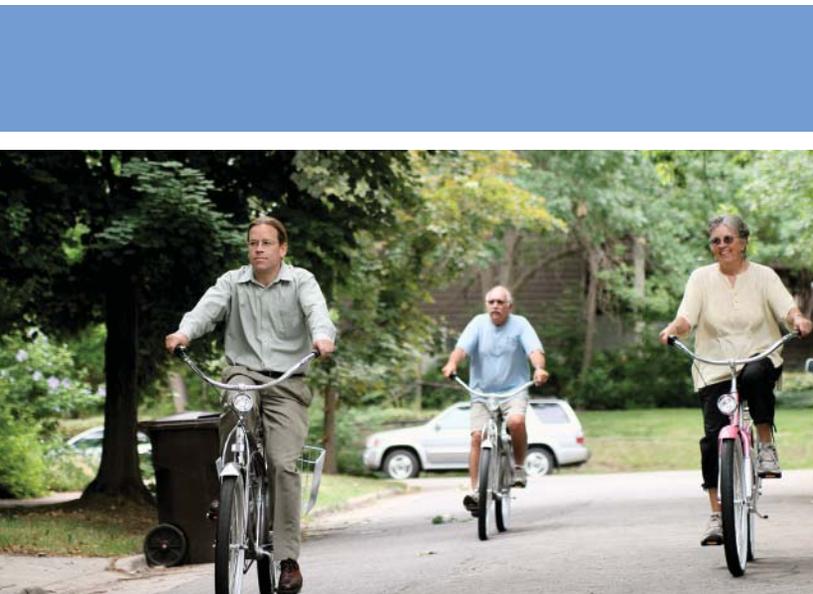
In addition, Portland requires secure indoor bicycle parking in new residential buildings. Developers are even beginning to market new homes based on bicycling amenities. Portland-based Realty Trust Group is developing a number of condominium buildings marketed to cyclists and those who want to make cycling part of their daily life. The signature image of the South Waterfront development is a bicycle commuter, coffee cup in hand, speeding along a waterfront bicycle trail.

Realty Trust promotes another of its projects with an ad campaign calling on consumers to “Kill Your Car.” The firm sees its bicycle-friendly marketing and development as part of a larger commitment to sustainability—all of its projects seek LEED certification. (The new LEED-ND, which looks beyond the individual building to include neighborhood sustainability, awards one point to buildings that are within three miles of essential destinations, assuming these destinations can be reached safely via bicycle.)

### Ease of Use—A Critical Component

The biggest barrier to widespread bicycle use in the United States is the lack of safe, convenient bicycling routes. The prospect of negotiating a six-lane suburban arterial on a bicycle, with cars speeding past at 55 mph, is something few Americans relish. When safer routes are introduced, their popularity hints that it’s the road, not the biking itself, that dissuades people from riding. In many communities, multi-use paths suffer from congestion as cyclists go out of their way to use the paths in place of roadways.

Bicycle advocates across the country are seeking to increase cyclists’ options. The Thunderhead Alliance, based in Washington, D.C., represents a coalition of local advocacy groups across the country that work for better facilities and greater respect for cyclists’ rights. With support from Trek’s One World, Two Wheels campaign, the League of American Bicyclists is expanding its Bicycle Friendly Communities program. The program recognizes communities where bicycling is safe and convenient, and supports other communities in their efforts to become more bike-friendly. Counties, cities and towns interested in the designation undergo an extensive application process, which evaluates everything from bicycle lanes and multi-use paths to secure bicycle parking and even showers for commuters. The program also looks at a community’s efforts to educate adults and children on safe cycling, as well as its record of enforcing laws that protect cyclists’ rights.



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lacking or inconvenient in those areas. Bicycles are seen as a natural solution.

Portland, Ore., has been encouraging both compact development and bicycling for decades. The city has added 277 miles of bikeways since the 1980s, much of it in the form of bike lanes that are integrated into existing roadways. The Portland City Auditor reports that six percent of commuters in Portland travel into the city by bicycle, and another 10 percent use a bicycle as their secondary means of commuting. Neighborhoods closest to downtown report bicycle commute rates approaching 30 percent.

REALTORS® Matt Kolb and Chris Sweeney of Pedal To Properties of Boulder enjoy showing their clients homes the old fashioned way.



### In the U.S. and Beyond

Arlington County, Va., across the Potomac River from Washington D.C., was recently awarded a Bicycle Friendly Communities Silver designation. (The program operates on a tiered system—Platinum, Gold, Silver and Bronze—to encourage communities to continue to improve resources for cyclists.) The county has adopted a complete streets policy to ensure that the road network is safe for all users, including cyclists. There is also an extensive, and popular, network of bike trails. Paul DeMaio, Bicycle Promotions Manager for the county, says local real estate agents frequently request a map showing bicycle trails and on-street bike lanes.

“Having a trail nearby is becoming important to homebuyers, in the same way that being located near a metro station is important, or being located along I-395 is important,” says DeMaio. The county requires secure indoor bicycle parking in residential buildings, and promotes bicycling and other forms of alternative transportation through informational kiosks in the lobbies of most large condo and apartment buildings.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission awards funding for transit amenities to communities that allow increased housing density. One of the commission’s programs, Transportation for Livable Communities, is increasingly funding bicycle-related projects. Another program called Safe Routes to Transit is aimed at helping people reach major transit hubs via foot and bicycle, rather than by car—the program has even helped expand the bicycle-carrying capacity of Bay Area Rapid Transit trains.

There is evidence that more residents ride when a community devotes resources to making bicycling a safe and attractive option. In a study of 35 typical U.S. cities with a population over 250,000, each additional mile of bike lanes

per square mile was associated with a roughly one percent increase in the share of workers commuting by bicycle.

The international effort to promote cycling as a form of transportation received a big push last year with the introduction of the Vélib system in Paris. More than 20,000 bicycles were placed at check-out stations throughout the city, and within a month residents and visitors made more than a million trips on these shared-use cycles. The mayor of London recently announced his intention to build a series of bicycle ‘highways’ into the center of town. European cities are turning to such programs to ease congestion and pollution, and similar programs are popping up in the United States. Arlington County, Va. is starting a short-term bicycle rental system designed to dovetail with the county’s car-sharing initiative. Bicycles available for rent will be locked to the poles used to mark the parking spaces reserved for the county’s shared cars.

Matt Kolb acknowledges that his Pedal to Properties concept will only work in places where bicycling is seen as safe and convenient. In Boulder, bicycling is such a part of the lifestyle that one new development is named The Peloton, a reference to the main pack of riders in a road race such as the Tour de France. But racing in a crowd is not what the new surge toward bicycling is all about.

“Most of the people finding us are out for a casual ride, to the grocery store or the coffee shop,” says Kolb. “They’ve adopted cruiser bikes as their second vehicle.” For Kolb, the bicycle’s role as a sustainable, convenient and cool vehicle is working—his sales since he launched the new firm a year ago have grown by 40 percent. ●

Barbara McCann serves as Coordinator of the National Complete Streets Coalition. She also writes on transportation and land-use issues and is co-authored of the book *Sprawl Costs* from Island Press.

# Life adjacent to a rail trail

By Craig Della Penna, REALTOR®, The Murphys REALTORS®, Inc. Northampton, MA

In the mid 1990s, I authored my first book on rail trails. It was around this time that I started to get more involved in the advocacy end of the rails-to-trails movement. My wife and I were living in a suburban community in western Massachusetts that shifted from farms to sprawled-out subdivisions shortly after WWII. Sadly, with single-use zoning in effect, it is a place where many residents have to spend nearly a gallon of gas to get a gallon of milk.

We were so smitten with the healthy lifestyle possibilities associated with living near a rail trail that we started to look for a house that was near one. Besides, as an advocate, it was important for me to not just “talk the talk,” but to actually “walk the walk,” so to speak.

We were also looking to live in a community that still had a vibrant and functioning downtown. Hmm... A house close to a trail, plus a decent downtown nearby? A tall order to say the least.

Well, one night while returning home from one of my lectures before an embryonic group of rail-trail advocates in New Hampshire, I decided to stop off in Northampton, Mass. More specifically, Florence, a village within Northampton. I wanted to see if any houses were for sale near the rail trail. Low and behold, there was one. I stumbled upon an old revival style farmhouse that was barely visible from the street, hidden behind years of neglected brush and overgrowth. The best part was that it sat eight feet from the rail trail.

We called the REALTOR® the next morning, toured the place and found it to be in even worse condition than it looked from the outside. Nevertheless, we saw the potential and jumped right into a bidding war with three other bidders. We prevailed, and in September of 2001, we moved in and started to restore the 1865 house.

We (and a slew of contractors) spent the next 14 months restoring not only the interior and exterior of the house, but also the grounds. This landscape work included the installation of “period gardens” with plants and themes that were common to the Civil War era. Although we had many surprises in the restoration, most of them unpleasant, one oddity was particularly interesting.

It seems that in 1868, three years after this house was built, the railroad came to Florence. The railroad was built so close to the house that the railroad officials offered a creative mitigation for the homeowners who were wary of cracked ceilings from the shaking the house was sure to experience. The railroad came in

and reinforced all the plaster ceilings in the house with lath-strips nailed every few inches. Below that, they installed canvas ceilings. The thinking was that if the passing trains cracked the ceilings, they would not be noticeable since they would be above the taut, but flexible canvas. When we came onto the scene 130-odd years later and restored the house, two rooms still had these canvas ceilings.

The village of Florence is like many others in southern New England. It was laid out in a grid pattern in the mid-19th Century with houses close together. As you get further from the village center, the feel is suburban, with typical 1950s to 1970s-era housing. One different feature in our community is that shortly after the railroad stopped running in 1969, some local visionaries suggested that the derelict corridor become a linear park.

At that time, the corridor was filled with trash, and known as a place where some in the community went to drink or use drugs. The idea of converting something bad into something good, namely a bike path (the term “rail trail” wasn’t even invented back then), was a “new fangled idea,” and something that not everyone supported.

In fact, the woman who owned our house at that time was the leader of the opposition to the idea of a bike trail. She would regularly trot out her then toddlers before the TV cameras and say that their lives would be endangered by the proposed



Above: Students in Massachusetts enjoy riding to school on the rail trail.

Courtesy of Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, the Burke-Gilman Sammamish Trail in King County, Wa.



conversion of the corridor into a trail. She was not alone in that thinking. Most of the neighbors also thought that the construction of a formal path would only invite more bad guys.

After several years of discussion, the rail trail opened in 1984. Things have not been the same since, but the change has been a positive one.

The rail trail in Florence is hardly a regional anomaly. One of the most notable things about New England that most people do not realize is the super-abundance of unused former railroad corridors. There are about 200 railroad-corridor projects underway right now within a 100-mile radius of Northampton and Florence. Since the 1960s, more than 70,000 miles of former railroad corridor has been taken out of the nation's inventory of operational railways. The majority of this mileage is here in the Northeast. The network of off-road paths that can be built in eastern New York and New England is simply unmatched anywhere else in the U.S. These paths connect the places where people live, work and play.

Each day on our particular rail trail starts pretty much the same way. Around 5:30 a.m. or at the crack of dawn, joggers and power walkers pass by. By 7:30 a.m., the dog walkers are out and by 8 a.m. school kids stream past. In fact, there are scores of kids. Most are walking, but a substantial number are on bikes and there is even a smattering of roller bladers. So many kids here walk, bike or blade to school that I hazard to guess one or two fewer school buses are needed, thanks to this "Safe Route to School."

Around 8:30 a.m., utilitarian bikers ride by—people biking to work. In the middle part of the day, the users are mostly retirees and mothers pushing baby carriages. The dog walkers are back out late in the afternoon. Then the evening strollers, joggers and walkers. My wife, who is a dedicated power-walker, is on the trail twice a day for a two-mile walk with our Scottish Terrier, Ivan.

On weekends the complexion of the path changes. There are more bicyclists, who tend to be tourists, although local joggers,

power-walkers, strollers and dog walkers are still out in force. To call these rail trails simply bike-paths is a misnomer. In fact, to call them recreation trails is a misnomer as well. They are genuine transportation facilities. The city has come around to this realization. A few years ago they began plowing the trail in the winter, so that it can remain open as a "Safe Route to School."

After the restoration of our house, we were honored to receive the city's Historic Preservation Award. Our work was also featured on House & Garden Television's (HGTV) acclaimed series, "Restore America."

During the restoration, we decided to go one step further and open a bed & breakfast. We call it Sugar Maple Trailside Inn. SMTI is the first bed & breakfast in New England that sits next to a rail trail—and also heavily markets to the bicycle tourism industry.

Our house was one of the closest to a working railroad—and it is certainly one of the closest to a rail trail. In addition, as an advocate, I view it as the perfect place to showcase rail trails' benefits to those fearful or concerned about the rail trail in their community. We offer complimentary rooms to rail trail opponents. We make only weeknights available because we want people to wake up to the laughter of children biking to school. The sight is something they remember, and something they probably don't see anymore in their community.

Many people living in suburban-style developments, as we used to, feel a longing that cannot easily be explained. I think it is the longing for neighborhoods like those many of us grew up in. Places where you knew your neighbors, places with porches, and certainly places with sidewalks.

This longing might also be explained by the lack of quality "third" places in society today. The first place is your family life. The second place is your work place. The third place is the place where people meet outside of the first two places. This concept of 'third place' was brought forward by Ray Oldenburg—an urban sociologist from Florida—who wrote about the importance of informal public gathering places in his book *The Great Good Place*.

The third place experience in many lucky communities today is the pathway known as a rail trail. The need for third places is why these projects are so successful. And it is one of the reasons we love living next to our rail trail.

*Craig Della Penna and his wife Kathleen operate Sugar Maple Trailside Inn located in Northampton, Mass. He was the New England representative for Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, but today is a REALTOR® in Mass.—working for The Murphys REALTORS®, Inc. specializing in the sale of residential property next to or near to rail trails and other greenways all over Massachusetts; <http://www.CraigDR.com>. His innovative real estate practice garnered national attention when it was featured in REALTOR® magazine. ●*