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Policies to Encourage Biking and Walking in Buffalo

Abstract

Despite having a climate that can make Siberia look attractive at time, Buffalo has a surprisingly large number of citizens who ride a bicycle or walk to work. But the City and Erie County have not done much to meet this high demand. Though there are a few streets within the City that do have marked bike lanes the vast majority do not. A similar problem exists in the suburbs; suburban roads frequently lack sidewalks, let alone bike lanes, though bicyclists can (and do) ride on the shoulder of the road. There are also a few signed bike routes (Sweet Home Road in Amherst being one of the better examples) and a nascent system of off-road bike trails (for example, the Ellicott Creek Trail, which runs through SUNY Buffalo's North Campus.)

Keywords

Buffalo, Environment, Transit, Report, PPG, PDF

Policies to Encourage Biking and Walking in Buffalo

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Introduction

Despite having a climate that can make Siberia look attractive at times, Buffalo has a surprisingly large number of citizens who ride a bicycle or walk to work. But the City and Erie County have not done much to meet this high demand. Though there are a few streets within the City that do have marked bike lanes¹, the vast majority do not. A similar problem exists in the suburbs; suburban roads frequently lack sidewalks, let alone bike lanes, though bicyclists can (and do) ride on the shoulder of the road. There are also a few signed bike routes (Sweet Home Road in Amherst being one of the better examples) and a nascent system of off-road bike trails (for example, the Ellicott Creek Trail, which runs through SUNY Buffalo's North Campus.)

The fact remains, though, that many of the roads and streets in the Buffalo-Niagara Region are simply not designed to safely accommodate anything but cars. This presents a serious problem when bicyclists and pedestrians attempt to use the streets, as is their right; in 2005 alone, over 15,000 pedestrians and 6,000 bicyclists were struck by motor vehicles in New York State. While it might be thrilling to defy death by commuting to work on a bike, this is not something one should *have* to do every time one pedals out of the driveway.

Complete Streets are Totally Sweet

Fortunately for the biking public, there are efforts underway to improve the Buffalo-Niagara Region's roads to make them more bike-friendly. These efforts

are presented in the Greater Buffalo-Niagara Regional Transportation Council's Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan. Much of the Master Plan focuses on a concept called “complete streets”, which is simply a policy where the needs of bicyclists and pedestrians are considered when designing (or redesigning) a road or street and incorporated into the final product.

Implementing a “complete streets” policy need not be time-consuming or expensive, provided it is done rationally at the outset. In many cases, incorporating the needs of bikers and pedestrians adds virtually nothing to the cost of the project. For example, say a bridge over an expressway needs to be rebuilt because it is in disrepair. Incorporating a safe way for bicyclists and pedestrians to cross the bridge into the design might require some additional forethought, but wouldn't be very expensive compared to the total cost of the project. On the other hand, if the bridge is built without regard to bikers and pedestrians, it might well have to be retrofitted, at great cost, sometime in the future. (This actually happened in Cary, Illinois; after several deaths and an expensive wrongful death lawsuit, the state Department of Transportation was forced to spend an additional \$882,000 to build a side path to correct its shortsightedness.)²

The GBNRTC recommends that every construction and reconstruction project undertaken in the Buffalo-Niagara Region incorporate the needs of bicyclists and pedestrians. That way, as more and more of the Region's road infrastructure is repaired or upgraded, more and more of the road network will become bicycle and pedestrian friendly. In fact, both the City of Buffalo and Erie County have adopted Complete Streets Policies for new construction and reconstruction, but they are almost universally ignored in practice, due to the inclusion of numerous “escape clauses” in the policies themselves³ and a lack of strong oversight by the Buffalo Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Board.

To correct these problems, Chapter 6, Article XI and Chapter 413, Article XIV of the Buffalo City Charter should be amended to transfer discretion regarding Complete Streets implementation from the Commissioner of Public Works to the City of Buffalo Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Board. The amended Charter also prevent the Common Council and the Mayor from stacking the Board with unqualified political patronage appointees by requiring that a supermajority of them be active bicyclists and requiring that the majority of them have actual, verifiable expertise.

To Avoid Pain, Stripe a Lane

This writer was recently visiting New York City and was pleasantly surprised to note the progress that the Big Apple has made in building a bicycle network. In point of fact, it is possible to ride from Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx, down the entire length of Manhattan Island, across the Brooklyn Bridge, and across Brooklyn to Coney Island, a distance of twenty-six miles, *without ever once leaving a bike lane*⁴! In contrast, Buffalo has *de facto* bike lanes that exist between moving vehicular traffic and the cars parked along the sidewalks. This state of affairs is obviously quite dangerous to motorists and bicyclists alike.

Adding bike lanes to existing streets significantly improves safety. Where there is a bike lane, motorists can expect at least the *possibility* of bikers being there. As it stands now, motorists are frequently taken by surprise when bicyclists ride in the gap between traffic and parked cars, since there is nothing to inform them that they might do so.

The GBNRTC has proposed a City-wide bicycle network that, when completed, would allow a bicyclist to get pretty much anywhere in the City using dedicated lanes, and recommends signing and striping twenty miles of the network per year until it is completed. (A map showing where these routes would be appears at the end of this brief.) It is up to the Department of Public Works to implement this policy, and they should begin doing so this coming spring.

I've Tickets to Pay, But That's Okay

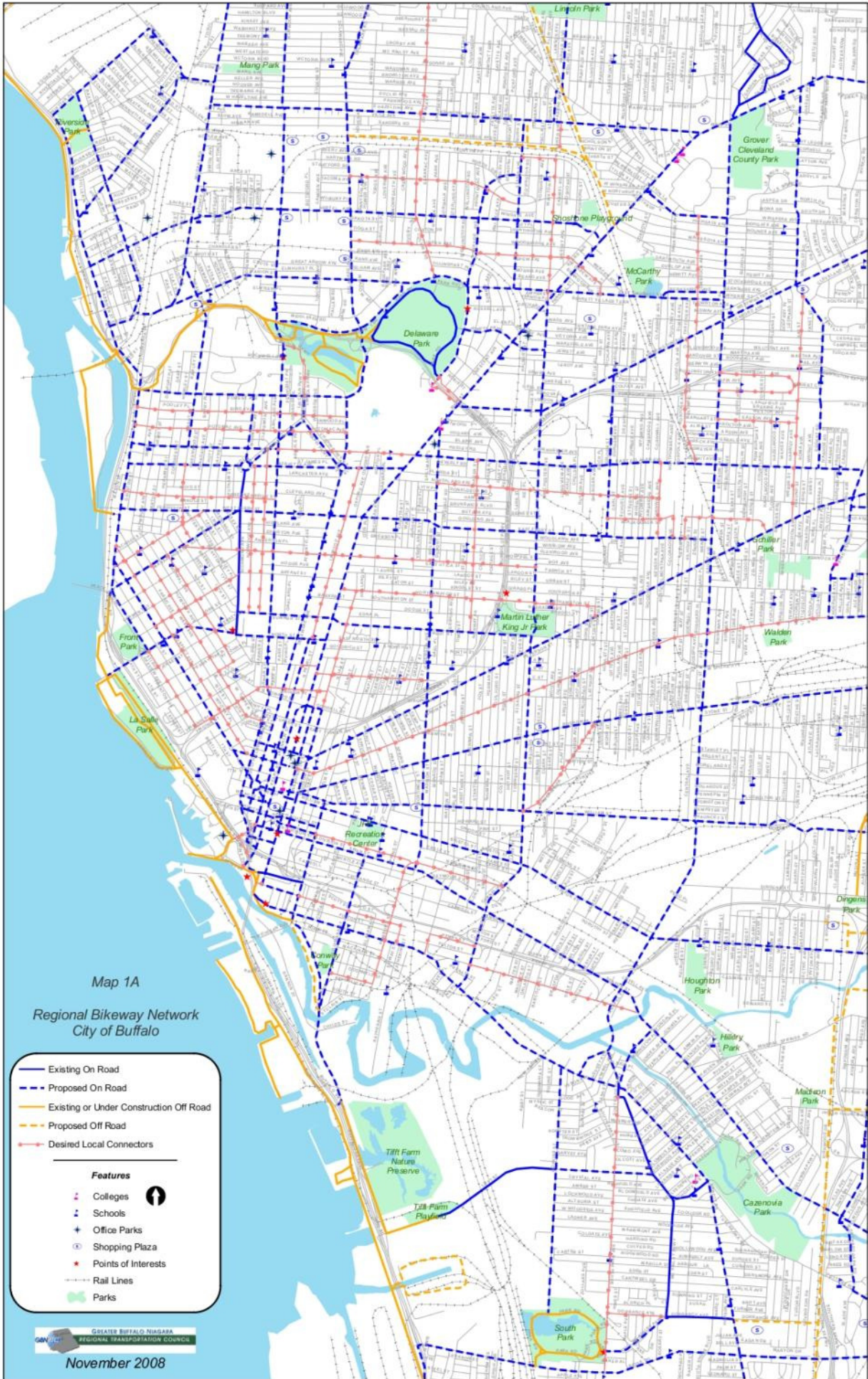
As with any quality-of-life improvements, there will inevitably be howls of protest from obstinate, contrarian factions who will complain about the cost of painting lines on the roads, and how Buffalo couldn't possibly afford such a large-scale project in these tough economic times. This is nothing but noise and baseless bluster, and it is not based in reality.

If Portland, Oregon is any indication, bike lanes cost approximately \$95,000 per mile to build⁵. But that's *new construction*, *i.e.* putting down asphalt where there was none before. Where there is already existing asphalt, the actual cost will vary depending on pavement condition and climate, but as might be expected, the bill is significantly less. For example, the Los Angeles Draft Bike Plan puts the cost at \$28,000/mile⁶. A study by the Vermont Agency of Transportation came up with a figure of \$20,000/mile⁷, “including striping, signage, pavement markings, cleaning, drainage and curb repair”. Many of the streets on the proposed grid could simply be restriped, and a bike lane created as if by magic. Buffalo Bicycle & Pedestrian Advisory Board chairman Justin Booth suggests

that Delaware Avenue, for example, could be reduced from two lanes in each direction to one, without significantly impairing traffic flow⁸. This would free up a great deal of space for a bike lane without the need to repave anything. In cases such as this, the only cost would be restriping, which the New York State DOT estimates at \$2.19 per linear foot (\$11,563/mile⁹).

The fact of the matter is, regardless of the actual cost, Buffalo already has more than enough money to pay for improvements to the bike network. According to its own budget, the City of Buffalo collects anywhere from \$4.6 million to \$5.7 million in parking fines and an additional \$1.1 million from on-street parking fees *every year*¹⁰. Even taking the highest cost estimate, building twenty miles of bike lanes would cost the city \$1.9 million per year. Instead of simply pouring that money down the drain into the City coffers, where it has been used to pay for, among other things, paying health insurance benefits for the dead¹¹, **the City should instead put parking fines and fees (or at least a portion thereof) aside into a fund used exclusively for bicycle network improvements, and make up the difference either by drawing from the General Fund, issuing a bond, or through modest, across-the-board spending cuts focusing on eliminating waste and fraud.** Not only would this give the City a much-needed boost to its perceived fiscal legitimacy, it would also give the citizens of Buffalo something concrete to show for the parking fines they might incur, thus making them more likely to pay them without spite¹².

In conclusion, there is no reason, other than a lack of political will, why the City's Department of Public Works couldn't begin putting the Complete Streets policy into actual practice tomorrow. The policy is already on paper. There is already an advisory framework in place. But all the planning and studies in the world are just words if they're not acted upon.



Map 1A

Regional Bikeway Network
City of Buffalo

	Existing On Road
	Proposed On Road
	Existing or Under Construction Off Road
	Proposed Off Road
	Desired Local Connectors

Features

	Colleges
	Schools
	Office Parks
	Shopping Plaza
	Points of Interests
	Rail Lines
	Parks

-
- 1 Specifically, these are: Richmond Ave. between Symphony Circle and West Ferry St., McKinley Parkway, half of Dorrance Ave., Tiff St., random bits of Scott St., Perry St., and South Park Ave., the 700 block of Main St., and the Delaware Park Golf Course loop road, which is more like an extended driveway than a roadway.
 - 2 National Complete Streets Coalition Fact sheet, *available at* <http://www.completestreets.org/complete-streets-fundamentals/factsheets/costs/>.
 - 3 Buffalo Complete Streets Policy, paragraph C, clauses 1-4, reproduced in GBNRTC Master Plan, p. 67.
 - 4 I'm not exaggerating; *see* <http://www.nycbikemaps.com/maps/nyc-bike-map/>.
 - 5 As of 1998, Portland, Oregon had approximately 252 miles of bike lanes, which had cost \$17,774,000 to implement. That's about \$23,790,000 today, or about \$95,000 per mile. Portland, OR Bicycle Master Plan, http://www.oregon.gov/ODOT/HWY/BIKEPED/docs/bp_plan_2.pdf.
 - 6 http://www.labikeplan.org/draft_plan/
 - 7 Cited by "Be Active New York", http://www.nysphysicalactivity.org/site/beactiveenv/nybc/source_files/6_resources/costdata/states_costest.xls.
 - 8 Personal interview, 15 October 2010.
 - 9 New York State Department of Transportation, 2001, cited in study, note 6 *supra*, adjusted for inflation.
 - 10 City of Buffalo 2009-10 Adopted Budget, Section II (General Fund Revenue by Department), p. 3.
 - 11 Yeah, I went there: <http://www.buffalonews.com/city/communities/buffalo/article100281.ece>
 - 12 Informal survey of 21 Buffalonian citizens, conducted by this writer.

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