

Pedal pushing Menino mounting bid to make city a bicyclist's dream

By Matt Viser, Globe Staff | September 20, 2007

Potholes, narrow roads, mean drivers.

Riding a bicycle in Boston is something akin to combat. Cyclists routinely rank the city America's worst.

Stung by national criticism and hoping to take a bite out of traffic and air pollution, Mayor Thomas M. Menino is vowing to change that. A newly converted cyclist himself, Menino will announce today the hiring of a bike czar, former Olympic cyclist Nicole Freedman, and a first phase of improvements to include 250 new bike racks across Boston and an online map system.

In the next several years, Menino said, he plans to create a network of bike lanes on roads such as Massachusetts Avenue and Commonwealth Avenue in the Back Bay and the Fenway. Paths could also be constructed to connect the Emerald Necklace system of parks, and the mayor is looking at facilities like showers, bike storage areas, and automated bike rental systems that make wheels instantly available to anyone with a credit card.

"We need to get more people to take the bike around. It's good for their health, it's good for the environment, and there's less congestion on our streets," Menino said. "It's time for this issue to come to the forefront."

So far, the city's most ambitious plans are in a brainstorming phase and could change, officials said. No money has been budgeted for the improvements, and neither Menino nor other officials could offer any commitment on when or exactly what the city will ultimately do. By contrast, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg recently pledged 1,200 new bike racks by 2009 and 200 miles of bike lanes by 2010.

Boston officials said they are still collecting data from bike commuters about the roads they most frequently travel to guide the city's decisions about where bike lanes should go. To aid in developing a master plan, the city will hold a summit next month of local bike enthusiasts and national experts.

Freedman said the city is committed to becoming more hospitable to bikes and to achieving a large-scale transformation, though some changes could take years.

"Boston has unbelievable potential," Freedman said. "We're a compact city, we're flat, we have a young population and lots of tourists. If we do this correctly, we have the potential to be one of the best bike cities in the country. In three years, I think we will see some very dramatic changes."

Menino's proposals sound a lot like promises that the mayor has made before. In 1999, when *Bicycling* magazine first labeled Boston the least bicycle-friendly city in the country, Menino established a Bicycle Advisory Committee, and two years later hired a bike coordinator to find ways to make the streets safer.

By 2003, the advisory committee had disbanded and the coordinator, Paul Schimek, was laid off due to budget cuts.

Some bikers are skeptical that this time things will work out any differently. "We'll believe it when we see it," said Craig Roth, a bike messenger who said he rides almost everywhere he goes.

Still, there may be reasons to believe Menino is more serious this time. Several members of his administration have taken up cycling, and last month they persuaded the mayor to get a bike. The 64-year-old mayor now rides a silver Trek around his Hyde Park neighborhood each morning for exercise.

"I love it!" Menino said.

"The problem before was that it wasn't a priority," said Schimek, the former bike coordinator whose main achievement during his two-year tenure was getting nearly 250 bike racks installed. "Now, apparently, it is."

Meanwhile, cities around the country have begun making serious commitments, seeing bikes as a way to begin reducing carbon emissions and get cars off the roads. Chicago opened a \$3.1 million Bike Station in 2004 at the downtown Millennium Park, where a \$149 annual charge buys showers, towel service, and a personal locker. Mayor Gavin Newsom of San Francisco announced a plan in May to see bicycles used for at least 10 percent of all trips in the city by 2010, and install 300 bike racks and 20 new bike lanes by then. Seattle recently announced a 10-year, \$240 million plan for bike lanes and other improvements for cyclists.

Only 1 percent of Boston residents bike to work, according to 2000 US census data, compared with 3 percent of Somerville residents and 4 percent of residents in Cambridge. That city established a bicycle committee in 1991, has several miles of bike lanes, and is considered one of the most bike-friendly places in the country.

Boston is looking at installing bike terminals throughout the city so residents and tourists could rent a bike, ride it, and return it to any terminal in Boston. The concept, similar to Zipcars, was recently implemented in Paris with the aim of having 20,600 bikes at 1,450 stations, or about one station every 300 yards. Credit cards are required for a deposit, but the rental is free for the first half hour, the time of most urban trips.

Boston's planners also hope to address a major concern: About one-fourth of respondents to a 2005 Internet poll of area residents said they would ride to work more often if there were showers available.

Officials plan to encourage businesses to offer shower facilities, and will try to encourage local gyms to allow nonmembers to use their showers. The city is also considering coin-operated public showers.

Boston has much to overcome if it's to be a biking mecca. Last year, Bicycling magazine put Boston on its list of worst cities for the third time since 1999, citing its "lousy roads, scarce and unconnected bike lanes, and bike-friendly gestures from city hall that go nowhere."

The Kryptonite lock company this year rated the Hub the third-worst place for bike theft, behind New York and Chicago - a trend evident by the bike carcasses spread throughout the city after thieves have pilfered parts and left the frame locked to the rack.

"It kills me," said Stephen Madden, a Dorchester native and editor of Bicycling magazine. But, he added, "I'd be derelict in my job not to put it on that list."

"My hope is to one day not just remove it from the worst places list but to put it on the best places list," he added. "The Red Sox won the World Series. Anything can happen."

Matt Viser can be reached at maviser@globe.com. ■