

CHAPTER TWO - INTRODUCTION

As traffic congestion increases, alternate forms of transportation will have to be sought. Building larger roads with more lanes becomes increasingly difficult over time. The cost to build roads has skyrocketed in recent years and acquiring right-of-way can be very costly and politically difficult to obtain. Roads can also have an adverse affect on land, water, and air quality. In recent years, the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) and transportation planners have been looking at alternatives to solve traffic problems. Bicycle and pedestrian travel has always been a form of transportation for some. However, through our dependence on the automobile, bicycle and pedestrian needs have been forgotten when infrastructure is created. This has made it difficult to utilize these forms of transportation due to concerns for safety and lack of facilities. Hence, people used them less and less. Now however, as traffic and health concerns grow, people want to go back to these basic forms of transportation.

GDOT has investigated these alternatives for years in areas like Atlanta with severe traffic congestion. Although they quickly realized that several changes needed to be made before bicycle and pedestrian travel could become a viable and safe form of transportation. Through planning and implementation many of these changes are now being addressed. This plan is being developed because GDOT is interested in enhancing bicycle and pedestrian alternatives in the whole State of Georgia. Through better planning, education, and the development of infrastructure it is hoped that bicycle and pedestrian travel will create more travel choices while preserving environmental quality and open space. Biking and walking are healthy, low-impact modes of travel that don't contribute to air pollution and traffic congestion. They are modes of travel that provide mobility to all citizens, including the young, old, disabled, low-income and others who may not drive. Furthermore, bicycle and pedestrian facilities support economic development in downtowns, urban centers and other mixed-use areas.

Over the last decade, bicycling has increasingly gained legitimacy as a feasible form of transportation. Cities and regions across the country are now choosing to create comprehensive transportation systems that include integrated bicycle and pedestrian facilities. These places offer their citizens alternative choices to using their automobiles for all of their transportation needs and are trying to break the monopoly that the automobile has had on our streets for most of the last century. The North Georgia region, like many other regions across the country, is facing increased healthcare costs, air pollution, traffic congestion and economic competition. Bicycling has warranted a second look because it is a convenient pollution-free mode of transportation that addresses these issues. Even with the enormous benefits bicycling offers, its adoption has been slow and remains marginalized within many American cities and regions. The major reason for this is that it requires a major cultural shift from the automobile as the sole means of transportation. This shift must take place on an individual level as well as a political level. For cities to reap the many benefits of bicycling, it must be institutionalized within the psyche of the entire community. Through this plan it is proposed that as the North Georgia region continues to grow and prosper, it will choose to integrate bicycle and pedestrian facilities as a part of its transportation strategy. This is not an easy task. This plan provides a clear course of action that, if implemented, can produce the required culture shift that will make the area a bicycle-friendly region. The transformation will not happen overnight. It will require a strong commitment from everyone involved. This plan is the first step.

Recent Bicycle and Pedestrian Improvements

Bicycles

Like many communities around the country, North Georgia is experiencing a resurgence in interest in bicycling as a means of transportation. The bicycle is a low-cost and effective means of transportation that is quiet, non-polluting, extremely energy-efficient, versatile, healthy, and fun. Bicycles also offer a low-cost mobility to the non-driving public.

Bicycling as a means of transportation has been growing in popularity as many communities work to create more balanced transportation systems and reclaim streets from auto dominance. In addition, recent trends find that more people are willing to cycle more frequently if better bicycle facilities are provided.

There are several reasons why North Georgia will make major gains in increasing bicycle use.

First, North Georgia has many of the attributes needed to become a bicycle-friendly community. This includes small cities, beautiful rural surroundings, a moderate climate, recreational attractions, and a population with a growing interest in health, environment, and livable neighborhoods. The popularity of recreational bicycling in North Georgia has significantly increased bicycle ridership. This plan addresses bicycles as a transportation mode of travel, defined as any trip that replaces a vehicle trip whether it be for commuting, shopping, traveling to and from school, or to reach a recreational destination.

Second, improvement in the bikes themselves have increased area interest. Since the invention of the Mountain bike, Mountain biking has become an increasingly popular activity in the region. The mountains provide a beautiful backdrop for use of this type of recreation. Many miles of mountain biking trails are available throughout the region or within a short drive outside the region. New trails are being developed all the time. However, due to the often-steep terrains of these trails, these trails can provide a challenge for the average rider. Many individuals after buying these bikes develop an interest to enjoy them on city streets instead of or in addition to driving to the mountains to enjoy them. Road biking is also growing in popularity the area. The rural roads outside the cities provide a wonderful setting for recreational riders. The sale of bicycles has done very well in the area. New bicycle shops are opening and the established ones are doing very well.

In recent years, area residents are expressing desire for more miles of bicycle lanes and off-street paths, "Share the Roads" signage, more bicycle parking, and better maintenance of existing facilities. For example, a biking club has recently started up in Whitfield County. Some of its members have been attending City of Dalton and Whitfield County government meetings asking for more bicycling facilities and educating council members on local bicycling issues. Council members have reacted favorably and "Share the Road" signs have been placed in the City of Dalton and in Whitfield County. The City has also donated land for the development of riding trails. These issues got television and newspaper coverage, which likely has led to more riders in the area.

Thirdly, policy support and additional funding have recently been made available for bicycle transportation improvements. This has been true on the Federal and recently the State level thanks to the State Transportation Board adoption of several goals to guide the development and implementation of a statewide bicycle and pedestrian system in 1995 and the Safe Routes to Schools programs. This has also been the case on the Federal level through:

- 1990 Clean Air Act,
- 1991 Inter-Modal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), and
- 1998 Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA21).

These laws have provided for increased spending on bicycle travel and allow communities more flexibility in spending highway funding on alternative modes, such as bicycling, walking, and transit. Already, these laws have led to over a billion dollars in bicycle, trail, and pedestrian projects nationwide, and thousands of miles in new bicycle lanes, sidewalks, multi-use trails, and other non-motorized enhancements.

The increased ridership, resulting advocacy, and increased policy and financial support from all government levels have resulted in a desire for significant bicycle transportation improvements. The following Regional Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan is a direct result of these changes and is intended to set a proactive course toward making bicycling and walking an integral part of daily life in the North Georgia region.

Pedestrians

Walking is the oldest and most basic form of human transportation. It is clean, requires little infrastructure, and is integral to the health of individuals and communities. People who walk know their neighbors and their neighborhood. A community that is designed to support walking is livable and attractive.

Although pedestrians have been valued for their contribution to urban vitality, walking, like bicycling, has not, until recently, been considered a serious means of transportation. Thanks in part to the passage of the 1991 ISTEA legislation and its companion funding opportunities, this is beginning to change. Communities are beginning to recognize the need for and value of developing pedestrian facilities, whether it is to enhance safety, health, or for commuting.

The North Georgia region's rural atmosphere seems to invite pedestrians to take a leisurely stroll downtown or walk to a community park. In fact, many of the cities in this region are indeed pedestrian friendly places to walk with their charm of historically significant buildings and architecture on a small, walkable scale. However, getting from outlying housing areas to these urban services or employment areas by foot can be challenging. Many streets have discontinuous sidewalks or no sidewalks at all, and crossing streets can be intimidating.

Opportunities certainly exist for improving the pedestrian system of North Georgia, which will offer more residents the option of walking to school, shop, work or play. These opportunities will be discussed in the subsequent sections.

Setting for the Plan

The planning area for this plan is the geographic area that the North Georgia Regional Development Center serves. This region is comprised of five counties: Fannin, Gilmer, Murray, Pickens, and Whitfield Counties. There are a total of 15 municipalities in this region. The largest cities in each county are Dalton (Whitfield County), Chatsworth (Murray County), Jasper (Pickens County), Ellijay (Gilmer County), and Blue Ridge (Fannin County). Other incorporated cities in the region are McCaysville, Mineral Bluff, and Morganton in Fannin County; East Ellijay in Gilmer County; Eton in Murray County; Nelson and Talking Rock in Pickens County; and Cohutta, Tunnel Hill, and Varnell in Whitfield County. The region covers 1,679 square miles and had a estimated population of 201,391 in 2003.

The region is located in the northern most middle part of the state with three counties (Whitfield, Murray, and Fannin) bordering the State of Tennessee. The northwestern part of the region starts to the southwest of Chattanooga, Tennessee and stretches along the State of Tennessee border to the southwestern tip of the State of North Carolina. The region extends to the south to Pickens County, which borders the northern portion of the greater Atlanta metropolitan area.

The region contains portions of the Chattahoochee National Forest to the west in Whitfield County and to the east in Murray, Gilmer, Fannin, and Pickens County. Much of the region contain steep slopes/mountainous areas. All these changes in topography make for beautiful scenery but challenging bicycling and pedestrian travel. There are a large number of rivers and streams throughout the region and many bridges across them. There are two large man-made lakes in the region: Carters Lake in Gilmer County and Blue Ridge Lake in Fannin County.

While the mountains and the scenic surrounding are the biggest attraction in the region, there are many other areas of significance in the region. Some of these destinations include:

- Fort Mountain - Murray County. A heavily visited State park which contains ancient serpentine wall of piled native stone once thought to be a fort, now thought to have been built for ceremonial purposes during the Woodland Period, at least one thousand years ago.
- Vann House, Mission Cemetery, and Historic Township of Spring Place - Murray County. Vann House was built in 1805 by half-Cherokee James Vann, noted for his promotion of Indian education and is now a museum.
- Tate House and Historic Township of Tate - Pickens County. Neoclassical Revival mansion built in 1923 of Georgia Etowah (pink) and white marble by Samuel C. Tate, owner and president of the Georgia Marble Company and founder of the township. Marble from quarried there was used to build everything from the Georgia Capital in Atlanta to the statue in the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C.
- Civil War Sites. The region is the holder of the largest collection of intact civil war embattlements in the country. Sites: *Resaca Battlefield* -Gordon and Whitfield Counties; *Rocky Face Ridge* -Whitfield County

- Railroad tunnels at Tunnel Hill -Whitfield County. Original Chetoogeta Mountain tunnel constructed in 1848-50 was the first railroad tunnel constructed in Georgia and one of the first in the South. This section of railroad, including the tunnel, became General Sherman's supply line, essential to his Atlanta Campaign. Site of yearly re-enactments.
- Appalachian Trail – Fannin County. Springer Mountain is the southern gateway to the Appalachian Mountains and the southern most terminus of the world-famous Appalachian Trail.
- Carpet Capital of the World – Whitfield and Murray Counties. 90% of the nation's floor coverings are manufactured in the region.
- Carter's Lake and Blue Ridge Lake Recreation Areas – Gilmer and Fannin Counties. Popular recreational areas. Carter Lake is built with a US Army Corp of Engineers dam, which is the largest earthen dam east of the Mississippi.
- Scenic Railroad in Blue Ridge – Fannin County. Seasonal train rides through beautiful mountain scenery.
- Northwest Trade and Convention Center – Whitfield County. Regional facility for conventions and mass audience entertainment events.
- Praters Mill – Whitfield County. Mid-19th century mill still grinds. Campsite for both Union and Confederate soldiers during the Civil War. Site of Indian village and mound. Host to annual Praters Mill Fair.

Why the North Georgia Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan?

This plan is part of a State-wide initiative funded by the State of Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) to promote bicycle and pedestrian travel as an alternative form of transportation throughout the State of Georgia. The following are the goals set by the Transportation Board for the State to guide the development and implementation of a statewide bicycle and pedestrian system.

- Promote non-motorized transportation as a means of congestion mitigation.
- Promote non-motorized transportation as an environmentally friendly means of mobility.
- Promote connectivity of non-motorized facilities with other modes of transportation.
- Promote bicycling and walking as mobility options in urban and rural areas of the state.
- Develop a transportation network of primary bicycle routes throughout the state to provide connectivity for intrastate and interstate bicycle travel.
- Promote establishment of U.S. numbered bicycle routes in Georgia as part of a national network of bicycle routes.
- Encourage economic development opportunities that enhance bicycle and pedestrian mobility.

GDOT is funding this and other plans throughout the State as part of implementation of the aforementioned goals.

Even without this State initiative there are many reasons why this plan is needed for North Georgia. Rapid growth and development of certain areas has not provided facilities for pedestrians such as sidewalks or bike lanes for pedestrians. Also, with increased growth and

development comes increased traffic congestion and larger faster roads that are not bike or pedestrian friendly. Furthermore, while some areas in North Georgia are perfect for walking and bicycling in many respects, many residents choose to drive even for short trips of a block or two, adding to the very traffic problems they dislike. This Plan is one step in addressing pedestrian travel and traffic congestion in the County.

Another reason is the enjoyment and quality of life for the residents of this North Georgia region. Since walking and bicycling are among the most popular forms of recreational activity in the United States (with 84 percent walking and 46 percent of Americans bicycling for pleasure), we can assume that many North Georgia residents walk and bicycle at least occasionally. Safety concerns are one of the primary reasons to improve bicycling conditions in North Georgia. Concerns about safety are a major reason why people do not commute by bicycle. Addressing safety concerns for pedestrians and bicyclists through physical and program improvements is another major objective of this North Georgia Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan.

Purpose of the North Georgia Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan

There are several things that are hoped that this plan can create and benefits that will come out of this plan.

First, implementation of this plan will give the citizens of North Georgia more transportation options. It would be great to increase the amount of people who commute to work by bike or walking, but even if people used this option for an occasional trip to the store it will help relieve traffic congestion. There are also citizens of North Georgia who do not own motor vehicles. In many of the cities in North Georgia there is a large need for a low skill labor force. Many of people in these jobs do not have their own motorized transportation to get to work. Taxis and other forms of transportation can be expensive for those on these limited incomes. These people could benefit from more transportation options.

The State of Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) would like to see better bicycle and pedestrian connectivity within and between regions of the State. GDOT has attempted to do this by establishing Bicycle Routes throughout the State. However, it could be a long time before these routes have the amenities to make them viable routes for bicycling travel. Also, many areas (counties) do not presently have State Bike Routes going through them and need bicycle travel consideration.

Increasing biking and walking can improve the health of North Georgia residents. This country has become more and more sedentary and obesity has become a problem for North Georgia and the nation as a whole. The health benefits of bicycling and walking to improve aerobic activity are substantial. Exercise has been proven to be effective in improving cardiovascular health and reducing strokes and other chronic diseases like obesity. While a formal exercise program is not practical for all individuals, reducing sedentary activities and substituting bicycling and walking for recreation or transportation would provide significant health benefits. Incorporating bicycling and walking into a daily routine is also time-efficient, as both travel and exercise are accomplished simultaneously.

There are potential environmental benefits associated with biking and walking for the region. Motor vehicles are the main source of noise and air pollution in the United States. Motor vehicle trips are the least fuel-efficient and most pollutant-producing form of travel. Carbon monoxide emissions from motorized vehicles can be as high as 90 percent of all emissions in urban areas. Air pollution is especially troublesome in mountain regions like North Georgia, because the mountains will sometimes trap the emissions from nearby cities. Areas of the Cohutta Wilderness in this region have shown elevated air pollution, because it is being trapped there from Chattanooga, Tennessee and cities in this region like Dalton and Chatsworth who have a large amount of industry. Motor vehicles also contribute to this problem. Biking and walking will mostly replace short trips, which have been found to be the most polluting.

Increasing bicycling and pedestrian transportation can also have economic benefits. Increasing the overall level of fitness of the area can help reduce health care costs for both individuals and on public service providers. Additionally, less expenditures for road construction and maintenance are required as a result of increasing the use of bicycling and pedestrian forms of transportation. Individuals may benefit from logging less miles on their vehicles and potentially reducing the number of vehicles per household. Many people cannot afford a vehicle or choose not to have a car. Bicycling offers these people a viable independent travel option. Yearly cost to operate a vehicle has been estimated over \$5,000 dollars a year, while the yearly cost to operate a bicycle for one year has been estimated by the League of American Bicyclists to cost about \$120. The area it takes to park one car could park 12 bicycles. There is also a societal benefit of having less fossil fuel reliance. Furthermore, bicycle facilities contribute to enhanced quality of life and are considered attractive to potential new residents as well as businesses which promote wellness/fitness. The provision of greenways can result in an increase in property values in addition to providing corridors for transportation.

Other potential benefits of bicycling include promotion of community cohesiveness and an enhanced sense of neighborhood by increasing and encouraging personal contact.

Becoming a Bicycle and Pedestrian Friendly Region

Safety, access, quality of life, a shift in attitudes, and effective implementation are imperative elements for North Georgia to become a more bicycle and pedestrian friendly region.

Safety is the number one concern of citizens, whether they are avid or casual recreational cyclists or walkers or pedestrian/bicycle commuters. In most cases, bicyclists and pedestrians must share narrow, high traffic roadways and cross busy intersections. A consistent bicycle network with either bike lanes or wider shoulders and signage is generally lacking in the region. The lack of a continuous sidewalk system in many areas of the cities and neighborhoods of the region, especially along busy streets and in older areas usually where there are steeper slopes, forces pedestrians and cyclists into traffic.

Access improvements for bicyclists and pedestrians are important to help improve the ability to take utilitarian trips to destinations like shops, work, and school. Additionally, North Georgia communities suffer from a lack of continuous and connected bikeways and walkways into the city's centers, schools, parks, and employment and shopping areas.

This plan urges the North Georgia counties and cities to take measurable steps toward the goal of improving every North Georgia citizen's quality of life, creating a more sustainable environment, reducing traffic congestion, vehicle exhaust emissions, noise, and energy consumption. The importance of developing a bicycle and pedestrian system that is attractive and inviting is a key element in preserving North Georgia as a place where people want to live, work, and visit. The attractiveness of the environment not only invites bicyclists and pedestrians to explore the North Georgia region, but more importantly, a beautiful environment helps to improve everyone's positive feelings about the quality of life in North Georgia.

There needs to be a major shift in the way we think about bicycle and pedestrian travel in this country. Through the last decades, this country has become so car dependent that riding a bike or walking are now thought of as activities only for the poor. Much in the way that meat on the table became a symbol of being well off, a person's car has become a symbol of a person's status. These attitudes effect perception of use of available facilities. Many motorists think that roads are for cars only and bikers and walkers do not belong on them. Many people believe (motorist and bikers) that bikers should be on sidewalks, which is usually always against the law due to safety issues for the pedestrian. These attitudes have to change before bicycling and pedestrian travel will become a widely used form of transportation. Some headway has been made in this area in the last few years but there is still room for much improvement. Increasing bicycle use will require a major cultural shift from the notion of the automobile as the sole means of transportation. The dominance of the automobile can be seen in the design of our roads and in the places we live. It can be seen in the individual choices that we make everyday.

Too often our infrastructure design discourages alternative modes of transportation in an attempt to optimize conditions for automotive travel. This promotes the widespread use of the automobile for even the shortest in-town trips. The ever-increasing levels of traffic further discourage people from choosing the cleaner, safer, more affordable, more efficient and more healthful alternatives - biking and walking. The optimization of the system for auto travel, to the extent that it degrades the walking and biking environment, works against drivers as people who might otherwise walk or bike choose to drive and compete for limited roadway and parking space.

Education, enforcement, engineering, and funding are the basic components of an effective implementation program for this Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan. Education must be targeted to the bicyclist as well as to the motorist regarding the rights and responsibilities of the bicyclist, pedestrian, and automobile driver. Also critical are comprehensive enforcement of existing traffic and parking laws and the implementation of sound design and engineering principles for bikeways. In the appendix is a section on sound design guidelines and principles for quality bicycle and pedestrian facilities. Finally, this plan proposes a strategy for obtaining grants and competing for other funding sources in order to realize the physical improvements identified as the highest priorities.

Role of the Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan

The North Georgia Bike and Pedestrian Plan is primarily a coordinating and resource document for the cities and counties of the region. This plan will focus on developing a primary network of bike routes, programs, and specific pedestrian enhancements. The plan also helps to ensure

good connectivity between the counties and cities within the region, yet connect outside the region. This plan will help develop joint projects where needed and develop consistent design standards.

Each county and city in the region has the option to develop and approve its own bicycle and pedestrian improvements. To the extent feasible, this plan has incorporated existing local plans and priorities as part of its recommendations. Each county and city can adopt this plan and meet State and Federal requirements for the projects identified in this plan.

Local projects not specifically included in this plan can be adopted and funded by each community as well. Many projects and programs included in this plan would need to be sponsored by a county or city, requiring local approvals and additional public input. All projects in this plan will require additional feasibility, design, environmental, and/or public input prior to being funded and constructed.

Bicycle and Pedestrian Planning Process

This plan was guided through a North Georgia Planning Advisory Committee (PAC). The PAC was made up of elected officials, other city and county officials, citizens, bicycle dealers, bike and pedestrian advocates, school officials, and public health officials from the North Georgia region. The PAC met three times during the development of this plan. They met once to develop a needs list, once to develop goals and objectives and once to discuss implementation strategies. There were also two public meetings for the plan. One meeting was to review and comment on the goals and objectives and one meeting was to review and comment on implementation strategies. Minutes of all these meetings are in the appendix. Drafts of the plan were reviewed by the PAC, local officials, and approved by the board of the North Georgia Regional Development Center.

Overview of the Plan

The following plan will outline the actions needed, specific bike and pedestrian routes, and time lines for making the North Georgia region a truly bicycle and pedestrian friendly. Chapter 3 summarizes the goals, objectives, and strategies guiding the implementation of this plan. Chapter 4 details the existing bikeway and pedestrian systems in the North Georgia region. Chapter 5 outlines the recommended bike routes and pedestrian system improvements, including education programs. This includes a framework for educating youth and adult cyclists and motorists, encouraging more cycling, and increasing the number of children bicycling and walking to schools. Chapter 6 outlines the implementation strategies, including priority projects, some estimated costs, and funding opportunities.

This plan is meant as a long-term guide for making North Georgia bicycle and pedestrian friendly. Its success will only be assured by the continued support of the North Georgia cycling and walking communities and other residents recognizing the benefits bicycling and walking bring to all residents.