

Proposal would turn riders into pedestrians - DDA hears recommendation bikes be walked

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Michael Klemish is lucky that a ring on his finger was the only thing seriously damaged when he stepped outside his workplace on State Street in Ann Arbor recently and got clobbered by a bicyclist riding on the sidewalk.

"I walked out the door and the bicyclist crashed right into me," said Klemish, a salesman at Ritz Camera, 318 S. State St. Klemish's 6-foot-8-inch, 300-plus-pound frame may have helped spare him injury. The cyclist, although knocked off her bicycle, also was not injured, Klemish said. The young woman asked Klemish if he was OK. When he replied that he was fine physically, "she took off," Klemish said.

Members of Ann Arbor's Downtown Development Authority hope to eliminate or at least reduce the frequency of such incidents with a new proposal that, among other things, would erect signs telling cyclists to walk bikes on sidewalks in the State Street area.

To make riding in the street safer, new signs there would remind motorists that they must share the road with bicycles, and new street markings would help cyclists judge how far to ride from the curb to avoid collisions with car doors being opened.

The request for action arose originally from the DDA's Citizens Advisory Council, which sponsored two meetings earlier this year to find out what people thought about bicyclists using the sidewalk and determined that many people thought it was a problem.

"A number of people have felt threatened over time by the fact that bicycles were riding along the sidewalk," said Ray Detter, chairman of the council.

It doesn't take long for conversations with merchants in the area to turn up bicycle mishap stories.

Barry Biniarz, who operates the Biener's Wieners hot dog stand on the corner of State Street and North University Avenue, said a bicyclist once landed inside his vehicle after hitting the door as he opened it.

Bud VanDeWege, owner of Moe's Sports Shops on North University Avenue, said he has often seen a customer go out his front door and have a near miss as an oncoming bicyclist slammed on his or her brakes.

VanDeWege often rides his own bike to work in the summer. "As pro-bike as I am, I think that it's a reasonable expectation that in certain areas (bicyclists) should walk their bikes," he said.

Bike rider Nick Jorgensen agreed. "I think the sidewalk generally should be reserved for pedestrians," he said.

Jorgensen, a University of Michigan graduate student, came to Ann Arbor from San Francisco, where he rode in the street all the time.

Jorgensen and two other cyclists interviewed for this story said they primarily ride in the street, although U-M graduate student Liz McDowell was using the sidewalk on her way back to work after noon Thursday.

"I think it's a terrific idea," McDowell said of the DDA's proposal. She said she rides on the street or sidewalk depending on "how the traffic seems." She would welcome the rule to walk bikes on the sidewalk, especially if changes make it easier to ride on the street, she said.

Since State Street and several nearby streets were switched from one-way to two-way traffic in August as part of an overall street and sidewalk improvement program, "no one really knows where to go," McDowell said.

Howard Erman, who was chaining his bicycle to one of the bike parking hoops on the street, said the proposed change

sounded fine.

"In fact, that would be a big improvement," Erman said.

DDA Executive Director Susan Pollay said that if the proposal goes forward, the new "**walk your bike**" signs would go up first on State and Liberty streets.

"That's where we're really hearing about conflicts between bike riders and pedestrians," Pollay said.

Depending on the results, the program could be extended to the entire State Street area, Pollay said. Eventually, it could be extended to the whole downtown area, but Pollay said such an extensive change would not take place any time soon.

"We want to make sure that we're not over-regulating where it's not needed," she said.

Although the report on the project proposes ticketing those who disobey the "**walk your bike**" signs, Pollay said the rule may not be so absolute. For instance, very young bike riders or those not confident enough to ride in the street would not be expected to do so, she said.

"It would be our hope to have as many bike riders in the street as possible," she said.

The report was prepared for the DDA by the consulting firm The Greenway Collaborative Inc. at a cost of \$23,150.

The DDA's next step will be to discuss the plan with city Public Services Department officials, Pollay said.

Bill Wheeler, public services director, said he knew only a little about the proposed changes, but he thought they would probably need City Council approval.

Klemish has taken his ring to a jeweler to see if it can be repaired. He thinks bicyclists, pedestrians and motorists in the area should be more careful.

"My general opinion of the area is that people ... don't pay attention. They just go," he said.