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Morgantown among the 'bicycle friendly'

BY CHELSEA FULLER

The Dominion Post

The state Department of Transportation (DOT) hosted a public meeting Tuesday to gather input on the Statewide Bicycle Connectivity Plan, which aims to make strategic connections between neighboring states, state regions, municipalities and points of interest, according to a DOT release.

The bicycle connectivity plan, which is funded through a Transportation and Community System Preservation (TCSP) Grant, includes three loops and 10 routes that were identified earlier in the planning process.

More than 20 people attended the meeting, the sixth of eight planned statewide.

Perry Keller, pedestrian/bicycle program coordinator with the statewide planning unit of the DOT, said the goal is to identify and sign bike routes that can be used by cyclists statewide and nationwide, and to make commuting and in-town cycling safer.

"We are trying to make sure that people in this area agree with the planning that's been done thus far," Keller said. "A lot of people across the state have given us positive feedback and they're interested in what we're trying to do," Keller said.

Frank Gmeindl is a member of the Monongalia Bike Club and has been riding in the Morgantown area since around 1973. He said there are small changes that could resolve some of the serious cycling issues in the area.

"There are some of the best trails in the state here in Morgantown, and I think Route 100

should be considered a top priority by the DOT because it doesn't need to be designated a bike route and it doesn't need a bike lane, it just needs pot holes patched and some signs to make people aware," Gmeindl said. "If you did that, you'd resolve 80 percent of cycling problems here because it is a very highly used route."

Morgantown's efforts toward being a bike-friendly community resulted in its recognition as a 2012 Bronze Bicycle Friendly Community. The League of American Bicyclists grants this award in different categories based on a city's investment in bicycling, promotion, bicycling education programs, infrastructure and pro-bicycling policies, said Bill Nesper, vice president of programs with the League of American Bicyclists.

Morgantown is the only city in West Virginia to make the list, though Huntington has received honorable mention for its efforts to become more bike-friendly. More than 200 cities are ranked from bronze to platinum based on various criteria.

Nesper said the organization, which was founded in 1880, was impressed with Morgantown's great recreational mountain biking (37 miles of singletrack mountain biking trails), the media campaigns promoting cycling education and safety, as well as the amount of information given to people when they purchase bikes.

"Street smarts are given

out with the purchase of bikes in your community and that is a great way to educate riders," he said.

Another selling point was Morgantown's Complete the Streets Policy, Nesper said.

"Morgantown got points for having a policy on the books that says when you

build roads, you will consider and accommodate bikers, pedestrians and transit users."

Also discussed in the meeting, held in city council chambers, were ways to improve Morgantown's standing with the League of American

Cyclists. Currently ranked 50th, Nesper said Morgantown is moving in the right direction with its statewide connectivity plan and educational initiatives.

"Adding more on-street biking facilities or bike lanes and making sure that cyclists are always accommodated at intersections is key. Also expanding the in-school bicycling activities and education will help because currently Morgantown schools don't have in-school bike safety education," Nesper said.

Keller said it's imperative that community members give feedback and provide comments during these meetings and online to ensure their concerns are addressed at the state level.

"If we get enough comment forms saying the same things, people will take notice."

Gmeindl, who's also a

League of American Bicyclists instructor, wants people to remember that cyclists have the same rights and are required to follow the same rules as motorists.

"In all 50 states, cyclists have the same rights as drivers and there are people spending a lot of money trying to get cyclists off the roads instead of trying to accommodate and make it safe for us to ride," Gmeindl said.

Riding the tails of this meeting is National Bike to Work Day on Friday.

To celebrate in Morgantown, WVU's sustainability, transportation and wellness programs will provide prime parking spots for students, faculty and staff who bike to campus, according to WVU.

Guided rides will be offered from the Sabraton, Woodburn, First Ward, and South Park neighborhoods, leaving at 7 a.m. A stop will be made at Hazel Ruby McQuain Amphitheater at 7:30 a.m. and then riders will continue to Evansdale. All rides will end up at Mountaineer Station.

Temporary bike parking will be offered across the street from the Mountainlair and at Mountaineer Station.

Bike to Work Day is a national event that demonstrates the benefits of cycling as practical transportation, according to WVU. This is part of the larger celebration hosted by the Morgantown Monongalia Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) and the Morgantown Bike Board.

Email bikemorgantown@gmail.com to get set up with a ride leader and a route.

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