

Fresno council: Make city more bicycle-friendly

By George Hostetter

The Fresno Bee, Monday, Nov. 29, 2010

For decades, Fresno never met a car it didn't like -- or a freeway it didn't want to extend.

Now, city officials want to turn Fresno into one of the nation's most bicycle-friendly communities.

The City Council last month unanimously adopted a master plan for bicycle and pedestrian traffic that aims to change the way Fresnoans get around town.

The plan envisions increasing the length of the city's bikeways nearly seven-fold, a six-fold increase in bicycle commuter trips and an expanded infrastructure that includes more bicycle racks.

The anticipated result: Healthier Fresnoans, cleaner air and consumer savings as people make less use of expensive-to-operate cars.

"Fresno could be a leader in bike-riding," said Bryan Jones, the city's traffic engineer. "It could be an inspiration to the rest of the Valley."

But there are challenges.

Council members asked: Where's the money? Which neighborhoods are first in line? And, hey, it's Fresno -- are all these bicycle dreams realistic?

"It's pretty easy to glance over the plan and say, 'Yeah, it looks great,'" Council President Larry Westerlund said. "It's another thing to understand that there is a whole set of policies that this competes with. ... It's not going to be cheap."

Jones, who spearheaded work on the plan with help from consultants and local bicycle activists, admits hard work lies ahead. Some of the work will be done as development occurs. Other work will require the city to dig into its pockets to pay for bicycle pathways in older neighborhoods.

But Jones, an avid bicyclist himself, thinks the time has come for Fresnoans to get out of their cars.

According to the 2000 Census, not even 1% of Fresnoans use a bicycle as their primary means of commuting to work. Jones said the goal is 5%.

He said bike lanes also will encourage more children to ride to school and adults to hop on the two-wheeler for that quick trip to the neighborhood convenience store.

According to the plan, Fresno currently has 134 miles of bikeways:

14 miles of bike paths -- for example, the Lewis S. Eaton trail along the San Joaquin River is a bike path. No cars are allowed.

113 miles of bike lanes -- these are on the side of streets. The lanes are designated by parallel white stripes, with the image of a bicyclist stenciled on the asphalt.

7 miles of bike routes -- these are on-street bikeways that connect paths and lanes. Bike routes generally have no dedicated lanes and are designated only by signs.

Jones said the goal is to increase this inventory to 210 miles of bike paths, 616 miles of bike lanes and 79 miles of bike routes -- 905 miles.

There is no firm timeline for the plan's implementation.

Jones said the space necessary to create a bike lane on an existing street often comes from a "road diet." For example, a four-lane street is reduced to three lanes, with the center lane for turning. Or a three-lane, one-way street is reduced to two lanes.

Jones said road diets are done only on streets with too much capacity for their volume of traffic. This means the diet doesn't reduce the volume of traffic that a street can effectively handle.

But, he said, road diets do slow the traffic, which improves the bicycling experience.

Many bike lanes are in north Fresno because of the city's growth patterns, Jones said.

Older neighborhoods were built before bike lanes were invented. It wasn't until sprawl to the north was in full swing that planners began requiring developers to include bike lanes in their projects, Jones said.

Jones said bikeways eventually will connect every Fresno neighborhood. He said 30 miles of bike lanes were added last year, mostly in the city's core. He said 15 to 30 miles are slated for next year.

Among the strategic priorities: Expanding the network of bike lanes in downtown, then connecting downtown with adjacent neighborhoods such as the Tower District.

"This won't happen overnight," Jones said. "This is a 20- to 50-year plan as money is made available."

Jones said the Measure C spending plan sets aside about \$55 million for bicycle infrastructure in Fresno County, including \$25 million for Fresno.

That works out to about \$1.25 million a year for Fresno, and the city hopes to increase that by threefold or fourfold through grants, Jones said.

Jones said the city has many bike-lane projects on the drawing board, ranging in length from one or two blocks to a mile or more. These include Broadway from Divisadero Avenue to Olive Avenue, Ventura Avenue from Highway 99 to R Street and Brawley Avenue from Clinton Avenue to Dakota Avenue.

Technically, there is a \$1.3 billion price tag for the entire plan, but much of that is road construction that would be done anyway. It's unclear how much the bike elements themselves would cost in a plan that has such a long timeline.

Westerlund said homebuyers, not developers, will ultimately pay for both the streets and their bike lanes in new projects.

City Manager Mark Scott said he and Mayor Ashley Swearingin support the master plan.

"Bike plans are a key part of redeveloping our older neighborhoods," Scott said.

Many people strongly supported the master plan at the Oct. 28 council meeting.

"This is a great way to improve public health," said Edward Smith, an official with the Fresno County Bicycle Coalition. "It's a great way to reduce traffic, to [improve air quality](#) and to improve the quality of life in Fresno."

But Peggy Lee cautioned the council to consider the need for increased law enforcement as the bicycle network grows. She said the bicycle/walking trail near her house in southeast Fresno is often filled with dirt-bike riders who produce a lot of noise and dust.

"You can't have people on bicycles with dirt-bikes behind them," Lee said.

Fresnans will like what they see if they just give the new master plan time and support, Jones said.

"That's the measure of a quality city -- when it's a bikeable city," Jones said.

[Modesto Bee Commentary, Tuesday, Nov. 30, 2010:](#)

Rail plus: A new and critical role for UC Merced

By E. Daniel Hirlleman

An ambitious, visionary, forward-thinking project requires an ambitious, visionary, forward-thinking support system. California's high-speed railway is just such a project. And UC Merced is ideally positioned to be a hub of that support system.

The project will improve the movement of people, goods and services and relieve congestion on freeways and at airports. It will improve air quality and energy efficiency while reducing greenhouse gas emissions and our dependence on foreign oil.

And it will create jobs — as many as 100,000 construction-related jobs and 450,000 permanent new jobs thanks to the economic growth high-speed rail will generate over the next 25 years, according to the California High-Speed Rail Authority.

There is no question the high-speed rail system will have a major impact on the economic development of the valley — slated to be the home of the first segment — and of the entire state. But it doesn't end there.

High-speed rail projects are in the works throughout the United States. And while other countries might be ahead of us at the moment, it is imperative that we settle for nothing less than becoming a global leader in high-speed rail technology and developing a next-generation regional workforce in the field.

UC Merced is uniquely qualified to help achieve this vision, due to our ambitious plans for growth, strong foundation within the peerless UC system and proximity to the nation's first high-speed rail corridor.

Through faculty expertise, research facilities, curriculum and outreach efforts, we envision an unprecedented synergy between UC Merced and high-speed rail.

High-speed rail is an integrated discipline that combines fields ranging from civil, environmental and mechanical engineering to economics, social sciences and communications. We cannot advance insights in one area of high-speed rail without an appreciation of the impact upon the entire system.

UC Merced will continue to grow, providing the opportunity for a meaningful portion of the campus' research and educational efforts to be integrated into this rapidly growing field. High-speed rail could evolve as a signature initiative at UC Merced, which would allow us to strengthen research through collaborative opportunities, utilize equipment and facilities more widely due to mutual needs and give our curriculum a unifying thread.

The result would be a mutually beneficial system in which the high-speed rail system is improved — and the valley's economy bolstered — by UC Merced's intellectual force, while the campus continues to establish itself as an integral component of the UC system and a dynamic place where California's next generation of leaders can develop.

My vision would be of a self-contained ecosystem, with high-speed rail engineering and maintenance facilities located near the university and an approach that integrates our partners in the California High-Speed Rail Authority, the public school and state university systems, local community colleges, regional and state governments, and businesses.

Incorporating high-speed rail into UC Merced's educational offerings would put us at the forefront of the field as high-speed rail expands throughout the United States, creating a calling card that would attract students, help advance the campus' growth and in turn increase our economic and cultural impact on the valley.

Our school will be educating engineers who have had their hands on a real project, their minds on the interdisciplinary big picture and their hearts in the community.

And our engagement in high-speed rail — with students working on projects, demonstrating prototypes in the maintenance or engineering facility that serves as their laboratory, and watching their brainchild speed by at 220 mph — would inspire the valley's youth to pursue higher education in science, technology, engineering and mathematics while helping ensure that a UC-level educational experience is literally only minutes away.

Hirleman is the dean of the UC Merced School of Engineering.