

Local

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Expert impressed with local bike paths

GET OUT!
KEN MCCALL



Sitting at a concrete picnic table at Eastwood MetroPark on a sunny but cool late Tuesday

afternoon, nationally known trail and bikeway planning expert Jeff Olson reflects on the Great Miami River corridor tour we've just completed.

Olson, co-owner of Alta Planning and Design, and a group of regional officials have just taken a desultory two-hour, 15-mile bike ride with plenty of stops for photos and discussion, around the downtown area to give the consultant a look at the hub of our trail system.

It turns out — for once — we're ahead of the curve.

"To have this much of a system in place — a lot of the places we work in wish they had this much on the ground already," says Olson, who has been hired by four regional agencies to develop a comprehensive regional bikeways plan.

That's pretty impressive when you consider that Olson is currently working on projects in Jackson Hole, Wyo.; Mammoth, Calif.; Indian River County, Fla.; and the Hudson Valley.

Back home in upstate New York, Olson says his region has nothing like our trails system. They're just starting a coordinated plan, and it will take 20 years to get what we already have on the ground.

"Cool," I say.

"Not if you live where I live," he says.

Olson was in town to begin his yearlong project to draft a plan to connect every community to the existing bike paths. At a meeting earlier in the day, he was told people don't find it safe or easy to get from where they live or work to the bike trails.

"So the challenge is to begin to create what nationally now is being called complete streets — streets that have sidewalks and bike facilities built into them so that all destinations ultimately are connected."

Other communities that have turned bicycling into a "mainstream form of transportation," he says, have all used a combination of on-street and off-street facilities, along with programs to promote the system.

It can be difficult, he says, because so much has been built around the automobile.

On the other hand, he points out, we're living with the effects of auto-dependency: an "epidemic" of physical inactivity and obesity, dependence on increasingly expensive fossil fuels and traffic congestion.

"When you live in a place that helped create the airplane, where people learned to fly," Olson says, "I certainly think it's possible for us to be able to figure out how to travel short distances without using our cars."

The good news: The separated paths, which are usually the most difficult and expensive parts of a system to build, are already in place here.

Olson gives credit to our numerous regional agencies — the Miami Conservancy District, Five Rivers MetroParks and the Miami Valley Regional Planning Commission — for laying the groundwork.

Olson will continue to gather information and put together a base map that he'll present at public meetings in late May. Then he'll draw up a draft plan to present in the fall. The final plan is due early next spring.

Don't be shy about sharing your thoughts with Olson. I wasn't, and he didn't mind a bit.

"There are a lot of people who have some incredible ideas that have been on their minds for a long time," he says. "Capturing all that information before we get started is really our first step here."

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