

Bikes on Sidewalks

Takoma Park Safe Roadways Committee Recommendation, July 2017

Recommendation

The Safe Roadways Committee (SRC) recommends removing sections [13.16.040](#) and [13.16.050](#) from the Takoma Park Municipal Code. This would eliminate the restriction on biking on sidewalks and remove archaic language regarding “coasting” and “skating” in the roadway. Removal of this section would allow people to bike on sidewalks as per Montgomery County [Code 31-5](#).

Background

The SRC recommended in November 2015 that the city amend the municipal code to allow bicycling on sidewalks. The city council has held two work sessions on this topic. Proposed changes to the municipal code have been discussed.

Impact

Amending the municipal code to allow bicycling on sidewalks would alleviate confusion and provide new opportunities to increase the number of people biking, a stated goal of the city council ([Chapter 2.16.110](#)). Amending the code could result in the following:

Protect people on bicycles in marked crosswalks

- A new Maryland state law taking effect on Oct. 1 will give people on bikes the same protections as people walking in marked crosswalks. However, the law will only apply if local law permits bicycles on sidewalks.
- The city should not deny this protection to bicyclists merely to preserve a ban on bicycles on sidewalks that is widely ignored and unenforced. The [death of Frank Towers](#), who was hit by a car in a crosswalk in Montgomery County, revealed the problems with this approach.

Encourage more people to bike by creating a feeling of safety

- National surveys have found that people rank a [lack of safety](#) and [concern about traffic](#) as the biggest obstacles to biking.
- New and inexperienced bikers may not be comfortable biking on narrow or congested streets without bike lanes, particularly when traffic is moving fast on those streets. Allowing them to bike on the sidewalk may make them more likely to start biking, thus building their experience and comfort level and “graduating” to using the streets when appropriate.

Create a more racially equitable system and encourage people of color to bike

- Takoma Park Police report that they have not issued citations for biking on the sidewalk in recent years and that they do not actively seek to give citations for this violation. However, an individual police officer could utilize as a reason to stop and question someone and/or to issue a citation.

- According to research, people of color experience some [different barriers](#) to biking and using Bikeshare systems than whites. One concern is being [racially profiled and stopped by police](#). A [recent study](#) found that people of color are more likely to have concerns about being the victim of crime or target of police harassment while riding Bikeshare.
- Nationwide [research](#) has also found that African Americans and Latinos are more likely to be stopped and questioned by police than whites, and African Americans are [more likely](#) to be victims of police force. Furthermore, [bike laws](#) are [enforced overwhelmingly](#) on people of color.
- By changing the code to allow bikes on sidewalks, the city can reduce the risk or perceived risk of a person having an encounter with police. This may make people of color more comfortable biking and more willing to do so.

Align the code with what is happening in practice

- Takoma Park police are not currently enforcing the code violation when they see people biking on sidewalks, and there seems to be no interest from the city council in having this violation enforced. This creates confusion and dissonance.
- By eliminating the mention of bikes on sidewalks in the municipal code, the city can allow the county code to determine the legality of biking in sidewalks. This will bring the code in line with current practice and eliminate the confusion and double-speak of stating one thing in the code but enforcing another in practice.

Allow children to bike on sidewalks

- The existing code allows “children’s vehicles” on sidewalks but does not specify what these are. Since they are included in a clause with “baby carriages” and “small wagons,” one can assume these are not regular bicycles.. Amending the code would make it possible for older children to bike on sidewalks while they are gaining experience and skills.

Allow parents to bike with kids

- If the city council decided to amend the code to allow children to bike on sidewalks (as has been discussed), this would not address the issue of adults being allowed to bike with their children. Adults biking slowly with a child who is on the sidewalk should not be expected to use the street.

Reduce confusion about where it is and is not legal to bike on sidewalks

- Allowing people to bike on the sidewalks in Takoma Park would create a seamless transition between Takoma Park, other parts of Montgomery County, and the District of Columbia, where biking on sidewalks is allowed. Presently, people may be confused about where it is and is not allowed.

Reduce confusion and doublespeak regarding bike racks and Bikeshare stations

- Bikeshare stations and most bike racks are located on sidewalks, making it natural to bike on the sidewalk for at least short periods.

FAQs

Isn't it unsafe for pedestrians if people bike on sidewalks?

- People biking at fast speeds on the sidewalks do represent a potential risk for people walking and may make some pedestrians uncomfortable. While most people biking on the sidewalk are respectful of pedestrians, the city should encourage safe bike-on-sidewalk behavior by utilizing bike education opportunities to teach people about ways to be cautious around pedestrians. The SRC can take the lead in doing this by writing a newsletter article outlining ways to reduce risk around pedestrians.
- There appears to be very limited research on the actual risk to pedestrians when people bike on the sidewalks; the SRC could not find any studies with information about the risks to pedestrians. As such, it may be helpful to look at local circumstances where pedestrians and bikes share a pathway/sidewalk already. Bikes and pedestrians regularly share Sligo Creek Parkway without significant incident, and during a portion of the bridge construction on Carroll Ave, bikes and pedestrians shared a sidewalk that had been narrowed by construction fences. We know of no reported incidents between bikes and pedestrians during this construction phase.
- People already bike on the sidewalks in Takoma Park despite the code restrictions, and we know of no reports of significant injury as a result. There does not appear to be a substantial enough concern about pedestrian safety to warrant action to enforce the existing restriction against biking on sidewalks, and there is unlikely to be significant change in pedestrian safety due to this code change.

Isn't it unsafe to bike on sidewalks?

- Most bike associations recommend against biking on sidewalks. The [League of American Bicyclists](#) notes the risk of obstructions, unpredictable pedestrian movements, limited visibility, and limited speed capacity on sidewalks.” Riding on the sidewalks also poses a risk of being hit by a car while [crossing at intersections](#), but also when [crossing driveways](#).
- However, the League of American Bicyclists website also notes that “there may be appropriate times to ride on a sidewalk or crosswalk, such as when crossing an unsafe high-speed roadway or when the skill or ability level of the rider is not suited for the adjacent roadway.”
- [Many studies](#) do suggest that biking on the sidewalk results in [more incidents](#), but few studies have taken into consideration the experience level or capability of bikers. One study notes that “it is possible based on the results... that sidewalk cycling is not inherently more dangerous but that those who use sidewalks are more dangerous cyclists” (13, [link](#)).
- Studies also cannot consider each individual situation. People who are biking need to make their own choices on a case-by-case basis about what seems safest to them, and

they should be free to do so. There may be situations, weather conditions, and times of day when biking on the road seems safer or less safe.

Why should we change the code if people are already biking on sidewalks without being stopped by police?

- It does no good to have a legal restriction if the city does not want it enforced. It serves as a deterrent to biking, particularly for those who may not know that the police do not actively cite violations.
- It also creates confusion and inequitably impacts people of color, as noted above. Maintaining the status quo does not address concerns that people of color may have regarding police contact and fear of being racially profiled.

Conclusion: Improved Bike Education and Infrastructure

Studies have shown that sidewalk biking decreases when bike lanes and other infrastructure changes are made. Thus, the Safe Roadways Committee recommends adding to the bike infrastructure in Takoma Park to make it safer and easier for people to bike on the streets.

The committee also recommends increasing opportunities for bike education to help people learn how to bike more safely and comfortably on the streets. These educational opportunities should note the risks of biking on the sidewalk. The Safe Roadways Committee also proposes writing an article for the Takoma Park newsletter that includes information about the municipal code change but also about the risks of biking on the sidewalk.

Submitted to the Takoma Park City Council on July 19, 2017, by the Safe Roadways Committee: Kacy Kostiuk (Chair), Mark Sherman, Frank Demarais, Mike Moore, Katheryn Phillips, John Gorman.

Appendix A: Additional Reading

[“Bicycling on Sidewalks,”](#) Cornell.

[“Bicycling on sidewalks: Not safe, not recommended,”](#) by Brent Hugh, Missouri Bicycle and Pedestrian Federation, August 22, 2016.

[“Bicyclists on Sidewalks: Why They're Not Going Away, and What We Can Do About It,”](#) by Ariel Godwin and Anne M. Price, Planetizen, March 10, 2016.

[“Have a Little Sympathy for the Sidewalk Cyclists,”](#) by Whet Moser, Chicago Magazine, July 16, 2014.

[“The Murky Truth Behind Sidewalk Bicycle Laws,”](#) by Christopher Kidd, Alta Planning + Design, June 3, 2014.

[“Silent barriers to bicycling, part III: Racial profiling of the Black and Latino community,”](#) by Stefani Cox and Charles Brown.

[“Study: Sidewalks a risky place to ride bikes,”](#) by Lenore Sobota, Pantagraph, Dec. 1, 2015.

[“What's Keeping People of Color from Using Divvy?,”](#) by John Greenfield.

[“What's Keeping People from Using Bikeshare? New Study Breaks It Down by Race and Income,”](#) by Stephen Miller, July 5, 2017.