

Breaking the vicious cycle: Organizations promote safer streets and bike commuting

By Kristin D'Agostino/kdagosti@cnc.com

SALEM - As gas prices push past \$3.50 per gallon, local bicycling enthusiasts and a new green-focused nonprofit are working to create a bike-friendly city where more people leave their cars at home when they're going to work.

Some members of the Salem Bike Path Committee is pushing to have the city adopt a road-marking system used in cycling hubs like Paris, San Francisco and Seattle. The system uses "sharrows," symbols painted on the pavement to guide cyclists while alerting drivers to share the road.

"We're trying to make a safer route north to south through the city," said David Pelletier, a member of the committee. "This system does what we need to do without using signs."

(See related stories at the bottom of this article, including profiles of bike commuters and news about MBTA ridership and a proposed extension of the Salem Bike Path.)

Given the traffic on Salem's narrow streets, many designed during horse-and-buggy days, Pelletier believes the sharrows system could potentially help guide cyclists through the city's less chaotic side streets and link a string of eight schools and nine parks.

Frank Taormina, a Planning Department staff member working with the

committee, emphasized the plan is still in the beginning stages. It will be discussed further at the next committee meeting on May 14.

“The city needs to endorse it before we move forward,” Taormina said, adding, “[The plan] would need to meet federal highway standards.”

In the meantime, a new green nonprofit in town is working with local businesses to encourage green methods of transportation among employees. The North Shore Transportation Management Association (NSTMA) is the eleventh of its kind to spring up in Massachusetts. Although it encompasses other area communities, it has found its strongest support in Salem, its lead sponsor.

The program received state funding last September and made its debut in March at a meeting of the North Shore Coalition of Mayors. This month it will begin settling into a new office in Salem’s Planning Department and building a base of local companies to work with.

NSTMA will be working this month with Dominion, owners of the Salem Harbor Power Station, the city of Salem and Osram Sylvania to promote alternative transportation among employees —emphasizing trains, buses, bikes and good old-fashioned feet as ways to get to work.

“Our goal is to get people out of cars ... and let employees know what’s available out there,” said Andrea Leary, executive director of NSTMA.

One well known initiative is happening this month in Boston is Bike to Work Week, held May 12-16, where businesses sign up to have one day set aside for employees to cycle to work. The event comes complete with a luncheon, raffles and free T-shirts.

Last year, through its worksite incentive programs, the NSTMA says it reduced the number of vehicle miles traveled in Massachusetts by more than 55 million.

On a local level, one employee at a time, Leary hopes to make a difference.

“We hope to get people into an active commute during summer months and help them reduce their carbon footprint,” she said.