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It's Hot: Cycling in Ocean City



Bicyclists cross Ninth Street using the bike path that traverses Ocean City, which has an extensive bike-friendly network.

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Ocean City has something that no other place in New Jersey has. And it doesn't have anything to do with boardwalk attractions or the town's famed dry status.

No, the town has something unique to the state for another reason: Ocean City has the only true street cycle track existing in New Jersey. It's only for half a block, but it exists as part of Ocean City's bike path - a path that one day is expected to allow a biker to traverse the whole island in bike lanes.

"Ocean City has the most extensive bike-friendly network [of any South Jersey Shore town]," said John Boyle, research director for the Bicycle Coalition of Greater Philadelphia, who provided the stat about the cycle track. "They have a very comprehensive bike plan and they've been implementing it. Every year it's gotten a little better."

The short stretch of Aldrich Avenue off Ninth Street runs behind a supermarket and once dead-ended at a bank parking lot. Last year, the city used a \$100,000 New Jersey Department of Transportation grant to help pay for a HAWK (high-intensity activated crosswalk) signal at the intersection - which allows bikers and pedestrians to activate a temporary crossing to go across busy Ninth Street.

Additionally, Aldrich was divided into one lane for cars (to enter the parking lot) and a two-way bike track. Riders can continue north along the bike path all the way to the Gardens Parkway, which connects with the Ocean City-Longport Bridge. Going south, the bike path goes all the way to 55th Street on Haven then West Avenues. West Avenue went from four lanes to two earlier this year.

"You can easily get a 16-mile ride in just along those roads and back," said Jim Wheatcroft, who does public relations for the Jersey Shore Cycle Club. "It's not an easy ride if you're looking for a little bit of exercise."

Boyle, of the Philadelphia bike coalition, has another description for Ocean City's bike boulevard: "One of the more innovative facilities in the state."

"It's more common out West," he said. "They really haven't taken hold on the East Coast." When installed, the HAWK signal on Ninth Street was one of only two in New Jersey. Ocean City has also made intersections more bicycle- (and pedestrian-) friendly by bumping out curbs to force drivers making turns to slow down.

The reconstruction of the Route 52 bridge, which connects to Ninth Street in Ocean City, allowed designers to create a route friendlier for cyclists and pedestrians.

"That was a well-planned project that has allowed people to be able to safely walk or ride their bicycles [over the bridge] into Ocean City," said Tom Garrett, South Jersey representative for the New Jersey Bike & Walk Coalition. "They're able to get to the Shore as a car would. . . . Many people use it. Many people can benefit from it."

Progressive infrastructure redesigns, such as bike lanes and traffic-calming measures, are generally thought of as primarily an urban thing. But boosters push bike infrastructure down the Shore, too. In the last few years, many Shore towns have expanded bike lanes and other bike paths. The state Department of Transportation has made a particular push for bike infrastructure at the Shore.

In addition to Ocean City, there are bike paths or lanes on Long Beach Island (on Long Beach Boulevard), in Brigantine and Longport, on Seven Mile Island (on Second Avenue in Stone Harbor and Dune Drive in Avalon), in the Wildwoods (a trail runs along the beach in Wildwood Crest to Wildwood, where it connects with the boardwalk and continues to North Wildwood's bike path - which goes all the way to the Sea Wall), and on Cape Island at the southern tip of the Shore. Atlantic City recently received nearly \$300,000 in grant money for a proposed bike lane.

All of these have been substantially expanded or refurbished in the last five years. Lower and Middle Townships are working on an effort to create a contiguous bikeway from the Cape May County Zoo to the ferry terminal. Most of it is already laned for bikes.

The expansion of bike lanes makes good sense for Shore resort towns. Bicycling has long been an attraction down the Shore; rental facilities dot the barrier islands. Vacationers from the area are beginning to see bicycle amenities in places such as Philadelphia; why not down the Shore, too?

Plus, Jersey Shore resort towns are already trying to get cars to slow down; studies have found the simple act of painting bike lanes on roads gets cars to slow down. A 2006 study from the University of Texas at Austin concluded bike lanes make both drivers and riders safer.

"The more people who feel safe biking, the more people bike," Randy LoBasso, of the Greater Philadelphia bike coalition, said. "And when there are more people biking on the streets, the streets are calmer, slower, and safer."

The one thing the Shore might be missing: bicycle parking. Boyle said bikes litter the area.

"Bikes are everywhere," he said. "They're tied to the boardwalk, to fences, everywhere. People don't lock their bikes because there's nowhere to park. It's going to take a lot more planning. Bicycling is part of their economy down there - it helps generate their tourism."