

Decide to Ride!

Local bicycling advocacy group drives plans to make county more “bike-friendly.”

BY VICTORIA ROSS
THE CONNECTION

Fionnuala Quinn of Fairfax regularly hops on her Trek hybrid bike for local trips, including visits to the dentist, grocery store and book club meetings. A native of Dublin, Quinn grew up bicycling and using public transportation.

Bruce Wright and his wife, Kerie Hitt of Reston, also use their bikes instead of a car for many trips. For nearly 20 years, they commuted to work on their bikes on a daily basis.

As active members of Fairfax Advocates for Better Bicycling (FABB), all three hope to make it easier for the other 200,000 bicycle-owners in Fairfax County to get out of their cars and onto their two-wheelers in the coming year.

“We often hear ‘I wish I could ride my bike to work or to school but it’s just not safe enough around here,’” said Wright, chairman and co-founder of FABB, which has a core membership of about 30 residents and an email list of 850 area cyclists.

“Since 2006, Fairfax County has become more bike friendly with the adoption of the county-wide bicycle initiative, but cyclists still need better-connected bike routes, secure bicycle parking and education programs to help them travel comfortably and safely,” Wright said.

IN DECEMBER, FABB was recognized by the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors for publishing a resource guide for cycling advocates in Virginia. The Guide for Reviewing Public Road Design and Bicycling Accommodations for Virginia Bicycling Advocates has become a popular guide for enthusiasts, outlining how to navigate the road design process.

“Agencies make critical planning, design and budgeting decisions that shape the new facilities that become part of the overall transportation system. This guide details ways advocates can influence the process,” said Quinn, a civil engineer who was the lead author of the guide.

“FABB is clearly focused on improving our quality of life and health by providing better opportunities for biking,” said Supervisor Catherine Hudgins (D-Hunter Mill). “[The group] has already completed a key goal of inform-

More Information

For more information on how to bike locally check out these websites: For a copy of Fairfax County’s bicycle maps and trails: www.fairfaxcounty.gov/fcdot/bike/bikemap.htm
www.fairfaxcounty.gov/trails/maps.htm
To help plan your bicycle trip online: www.ridethecity.com/dc
www.wmata.com/ridertools/tripplanner
www.bikevirginia.org
To get involved in bicycle advocacy: www.fabb-bikes.org
www.waba.org
♦(FABB is affiliated with the Washington Area Bicyclist Association, an advocacy group for the D.C. metro area)

ing the community and providing directions on how to improve biking opportunities with its wonderful guide.”

Hudgins, who has backed many cycling initiatives, said she thinks cycling generally helps create more livable, healthy and sustainable communities by “connecting us as people.”

“I have a great foldable Dahon bike that is not getting enough use. I usually ride the pathways in Reston and the W&OD Trail when I have time, but not lately,” she said.

Supervisor John W. Foust (D-Dranesville), who named improving pedestrian and bicycle safety as two of his top priorities, agrees with Hudgins, and said he supports FABB’s efforts. “We need to encourage people to get out of their cars and exercise outdoors. Improving the trail and bicycle networks are excellent ways to do this,” Foust said.

Supervisor Penelope Gross (D-Mason) also said she welcomes the input of FABB and other cycling advocates who help determine “how and where we can get the best bang for our buck.”

“In my district, I have been working with my appointee to the Sidewalk and Trails Committee to identify those areas in Mason District that would be better served by improving bicycle connections. My appointee, and my new land use aide, who is an avid cyclist, recently took a cross-district bike ride to examine trails, stream valleys, and even culverts under I-395 for possible pedestrian and bicycle connections. It was a wet and dirty trek, highlighting the need for improvements,” Gross said.

BICYCLE ADVOCATES contend that cycling can improve quality-of-life issues such as traffic congestion, air quality and childhood obesity. But opinions vary among Fairfax County Supervisors as to

how much the County can and should do to make it more bicycle-friendly, particularly in a tight budget environment.

“I think there’s always room for promoting trails and promoting cycling,” said Supervisor Pat Herry (R-Springfield), but he differs somewhat with FABB’s approach. Instead of dedicated bike lanes on roads, he would like to see cyclists using Fairfax County’s 500 miles of trails (shared use paths), that crisscross the county and range in width from six feet to the newer 10-foot standard.

“Fairfax County has an award-winning trail system, and I think most cyclists would appreciate more trails as connections, rather than riding on the roads and competing with motorists,” Herry said.

When the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors approved the comprehensive bicycle initiative in 2006, a program committed to making Fairfax County bicycle-friendly, the plan established a full-time staff position devoted to bicycle facility coordination.

Wright and Quinn maintain that without the County’s hiring of Charlie Strunk, the bicycle coordinator for the county’s Department of Transportation, and Jeffrey Hermann, a transportation planner, Fairfax County would not have moved forward with recent projects that make the area more accessible to cyclists. “They have been invaluable in helping us with these initiatives,” Wright said.

Since 2006, several projects have been completed by the County, including:

- The County’s fleet of Connector buses were equipped with front-mounted bike racks;
- Creation of a county bicycle route map;
- Large annual increases in Bike-to-Work day participation;
- Bike lanes added along several streets including Lawyer’s Road,



PHOTO BY VICTORIA ROSS/THE CONNECTION

FABB Chairman, Bruce Wright and long-time cyclist Kerie Hitt, of Reston, pose on their recumbent tandem bike with Fionnuala Quinn at the Fairfax County Government Center in December after receiving an award from the Board of Supervisors for FABB’s cycling advocacy guide.

Gallows Road, Westmoreland Street and Wakefield Chapel Road;

- More bicycle parking – racks and municipal lockers at many locations, plus bike valets at several events;

- Accommodation of bikes in the HOT lane crossings being constructed over the Beltway.

“Fairfax County has a long way to go to be ‘bike-friendly,’ but I believe it’s moving in the right direction,” said Oakton cyclist Chris French, who regularly bicycles with his wife and son on the weekends, and also organizes bike rodeo safety sessions for his Cub Scout pack.

“The addition of bike lanes and other bicycle infrastructure improvements in part of the county, the Tysons Bicycle Master Plan, and energetic bike programs in Arlington and the district are all encouraging signs of progress,” but he would like to see initiatives that put cycling on a more equal footing with automobiles.

French regularly commutes from his home in Oakton to his job at Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC) in Tysons Corner. He said the commute – about 14 miles round-trip – started as something fun to do on a Friday in the summer, but the benefits were so great he evolved into a daily bicycle commuter about a year ago.

“Bike commuting has a lot to

offer. It’s a lot of fun, great for your physical fitness, an excellent stress reducer, reduces your carbon footprint, and improves air quality,” he said, adding that if none of that is appealing, bike-commuting also saves money. “As a daily commuter, I save more than \$1,000 a year on gas and related car expenses.” French is on FABB’s email list, but is not a board member.

LAST WEEK, FABB held its annual planning meeting, and announced its top two priorities for 2011. Wright said the group wants to work with Fairfax County to develop the county-wide bicycle master plan, similar to the Tysons Master Plan, and to educate the Board of Supervisors and Fairfax County Public Schools about the Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program. SRTS initiatives include creating more bike/walking lanes to elementary and middle schools, and teaching bicycle safety as part of the 5th-grade curriculum. On Feb. 1, FABB is scheduled to make its first presentation on SRTS to the Board’s Transportation Subcommittee.

“Ultimately, we think everyone can benefit by Fairfax County becoming more bike-friendly; it reduces congestion, allows residents the option of using a healthy, inexpensive way to get around, and reduces our dependence on foreign oil,” Wright said.