

Tom Horton's vision: Why bikes are part of Salisbury's future

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On my way to the Barnes & Noble bookstore recently, I stopped to catch a bite at Panera Bread. In a car, I wouldn't have noticed the inviting loaves of bread through the window; I would've gone on by.

But I was on a bicycle, moving at human speed and open to sights, sounds and smells.

The well-documented boost to local shopping and dining from cyclists is one reason bike-friendliness is catching on, from places like New York and Los Angeles down to smalltown America.

Biking's also good for your health, good for air quality, takes the edge off rush hour traffic, requires zero foreign oil and draws tourists.

It doesn't just happen. The Dutch, who make more than half of all trips on two wheels, made conscious national decisions to promote and support cycling following the Arab oil embargo in the 1970s.

There is every reason Salisbury could ride the growing cycling trend and make it one of our signatures. Mayor Jim Ireton and the City Council have made a good start by establishing our first designated bike routes.

We're only scratching the surface of Salisbury's potential here. We're flat as the Netherlands, where it's common to see 80-year-old women rolling easily along, shopping bags dangling from their handlebars.

We've got a university with something like 8,500 students — a natural audience for biking. Universities are perfect places to start bike-share programs, through which you just pick up a bike and go, and then leave it at your destination.

The Sea Gull Century each fall draws 8,000 or so cyclists from across the mid-Atlantic, so we're already on the map as a bike destination.

The vast majority of our roads and city streets are relatively untrafficked. In addition to hundreds of miles of scenic paved roads here on the lower Shore, there are hundreds more miles of bikeable roads in our state forestlands, which the Department of Natural Resources is mapping.

We must focus especially on the large number of people who say in polls they'd like to bike, but worry about safety, or who just aren't sure how to start.

More designated bike routes, more fun bike events, more education, more prominent Salisburians prominently out and about on their bicycles; incentives for not taking up a parking space — the ways forward aren't mysterious.

I hear the mutterings about “rain taxes” on the stormwater runoff from all the parking lots. If we made half our trips on bikes, could we turn some of those into urban parks?

Large numbers of us out pedaling instead of sealed inside cars would make Salisbury more social. Imagine actually enjoying your commute.

The future is partly smaller, slower.

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