The Tucson/Pima Eastern Region Platinum Challenge Task Force recently met to focus on Evaluation and Planning, one of the “Five Es” that the League of American Bicyclists (LAB) uses to assess Bicycle Friendly Community (BFC) applications. (The other four Es that the taskforce will address are Encouragement, Engineering, Education, and Enforcement.)

As defined by LAB, Evaluation and Planning includes the systems that a community has in place to evaluate its current bicycling programs and plans for the future. Major components of this category include ridership, crash rates, and ways to improve upon those numbers. Another important element is whether or not the community has a bike plan, how much of the plan has been implemented, and next steps for improvement.

The Planning and Evaluation Subcommittee is chaired by platinum taskforce coordinator, Constance Chanecka. Her organization, the Pima Association of Governments (PAG), is working on the latest update of Tucson’s Regional Plan for Bicycling. The plan was last updated in 2009.

“That was the 6th update to the plan, which started in the mid-1970s,” Chanecka explained. “We’re working on updating it again soon.” PAG is currently seeking additional funding for the update.

As it stands, the bicycle plan describes a massive infrastructure that spans nine jurisdictions and continues to grow; the bikeway expansion goal for the year 2020 is to have 1165 total miles of bike facilities (all types), up from the 2009 level of 702 miles (the latest total are already up to 956 miles; the 2030 goal foresees 1561 total miles). The parameters of the plan were shaped in part by the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA), whose 20-year, $2.1 billion regional transportation plan was approved by voters on May 16, 2006. That much larger plan includes $60 million for “Bicycle, Pedestrian and Shared-use Path facilities.” The 2009 Tucson Regional Plan for Bicycling can be found on PAG’s Website (pagnet.org).

A SPECIAL VISIT

In the middle of May, National Bike Month, the platinum taskforce’s planning and evaluation review process was set aside temporarily to plan for something else. Andy Clarke, President of the LAB, visited Tucson for a few days. His packed schedule included meetings with the Platinum Challenge taskforce, which gave a presentation highlighting the progress the Tucson region has made since its last earning gold status in 2008.

To showcase local facilities, Matt Zoll, taskforce member and Bicycle and Pedestrian Program Manager for Pima County, hosted a ride for Clarke along several miles of the Urban Loop and the Mountain Avenue buffer lanes. “The trail system and the growth of the path network is clearly a great thing for the future,” Clarke said to a KOVA TV reporter on the scene. “Tucson has a fantastic cycling culture. The people involved and the enthusiasm that’s here is evident.”

The highlight of Clarke’s visit was a May 16 “Pedaling Towards Platinum” public forum at the Tucson Convention Center, which attracted more than two hundred bicycling supporters. Clarke presented an award to University of Arizona President Robert Shelton, in recognition of UAs recent silver designation as a Bicycle Friendly University (BFU). The LAB inaugurated its BFU program this spring, and it was quite a surprise that the University of Arizona was among the first rounds of recipients. The UA offers bike valet stations, a bike share program, and a bike kiosk for information and repairs. There is a high demand for bicycle facilities on and around the campus. “That’s where our ridership numbers are through the roof,” said Chanecka.

In addition to the award ceremony, the public forum also featured a panel discussion that included Clarke; Chuck Huckleberry, Pima County Administrator; Todd Emery, District Director for ADOT; and City of Tucson Councilmember Steve Kozachik. According to reporting by Mike McKisson (Region must focus on short trips to reach platinum rating; 5/17/11; tucsonvenlo.com), Clarke emphasized the need for higher bicycle ridership – bicycle use as a mode of transportation – in order for the Tucson region to achieve Platinum status.

“That is the real challenge and what will truly propel you to platinum. You’ve got great infrastructure, you’ve got great education programs, we need to just see more people out there riding,” Clarke was quoted in the articles. Clarke explained the key ways of improving everyday ridership, according to Clarke, lie in encouragement activities. Tucson is one of a total of seven cities (cycloviationtucson.org) last spring that drew thousands of bicyclists, and this year’s event drew even more.

In the past, Clarke would like to see monthly or even weekly cyclovias in Tucson.

“It will open people’s eyes to what is possible in their community in a way nothing else does,” Clarke said in the tucsonvenlo.com article. Furthermore, Clarke suggested combining Cyclovia-type events with targeted marketing campaigns to inform people about their options for bicycling to work, shops, and other attractions around town.

To press his point, Clarke invoked the following statistics throughout his Tucson visit: 40 percent of all the trips in the United States are less than two miles long, and 66 percent of those are made by car; only 15 percent of all the trips in the U.S. are trips to work. Replacing short car trips with trips by bicycle is the key to Tucson’s growth in ridership.

But what about Tucson’s reputation as a road cycling paradise – doesn’t that make it exceptionally bike friendly? In terms of bicycle recreation and training, absolutely. But those are not the primary standards by which the LAB defines a Bicycle Friendly Community. To further understand why bicycling as a mode of transportation is key to BFC ratings, read Mike McKisson’s excellent Q&A with Andy Clarke (“LAB president: Tucson needs more commuters to compete;” 5/16/11; tucsonvenlo.com).

DELVING INTO DATA

In contrast to recreational bicycling, official bicycle commuting numbers in the region – based on U.S. Census data – have remained relatively low and unchanged. “Back in 2006, we were the number one city in the U.S. for major cities, for bike commuting,” said Tom Thivener, City of Tucson Bicycle & Pedestrian Program Manager. However, the rate has remained around 2 percent ever since, and today Tucson ranks 12th in bike commuting.

One important way to improve ridership is to be better at evaluating what brings us back to the evaluation and planning process. The Tucson region is moving aggressively to capture and analyze more data of its own.

“PAG started a regional bike count program in 2008,” said Chanecka. “So now we have three years of pretty rich data, to supplement the Census data and give a better idea, over time, of who’s riding. We also keep track of things like gender, age, helmet use, who’s riding on the sidewalk, and wrong-way riding.”

The bike count targets commuters as well as recreational bicycling; it conducted every fall in about 100 locations with the help of volunteers. Mountain bike counts have been added this year, and PAG is also in the process of acquiring two or three automated counters to track cyclists at all times.

The bike count is also a valuable tool for improving safety. “It helps us to identify if there’s a particular area that’s a problem,” said Gabe Thurn, also of PAGs. “Say, for example, around an elementary school there’s a lot of wrong-way riding kids with no helmets, that’s an indication to us that we need to do some outreach there. So that is a way that we can ultimately help reduce the crash rate.”

Reducing bicycle crash rates has also proved challenging for the region. However, in addition to conducting ongoing crash analysis with the help of ADOT and law enforcement, the Tucson region will launch a road safety assessment (RSA) program in the fall. RSAs are conducted by a multidisciplinary team of planning, traffic safety and engineering experts who will analyze a particular intersection or roadway and recommend ways of improving safety there. “RSAs are designed for all roadway users,” Thurn explained. “But particular care is given to the most vulnerable users, which are bicyclists and pedestrians.”

NEXT UP: The Platinum Taskforce looks at Encouragement

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