PUSH FOR PLATINUM

Continued Improvements, Increased Ridership Make A Strong Case For Moving Up From Gold in The League Of American Bicyclists’ Bicycle Friendly Communities Program

by Kate Holder

Editor’s Note: This is the fifth and final article in the series that Tail Winds has published on Tucson and Eastern Pima County Region’s effort to achieve platinum status as a Bicycle Friendly Community in 2012.

As this article goes to press, the Tucson/Eastern Pima County Region (Tucson Region) is wrapping up its Bicycle Friendly Community (BFC) application to submit to the League of American Bicyclists (LAB) in February 2012. The Tucson Region was last designated as a gold-level BFC, for the second time, in 2008. Once a city, or in this case, a region, is recognized as a BFC, it must re-apply within four years to the LAB to maintain a designation.

In late 2010, the Tucson Region formed a Platinum Challenge Task Force with the self-proclaimed goal to move the region up from its rank of gold to platinum, the highest designation. The task force and platinum application is coordinated by the Pima Association of Governments (PAG). Platinum is an ambitious goal for the only BFC region to be highly ranked, and no small feat for one that encompasses nine jurisdictions, 2,183 square miles, and more than 965,000 people.

Yet, more than ever, many in the region are convinced that platinum is not only within reach. The single biggest reason, arguably, is the dramatic increase in bicycle commuting in Tucson.

A Jump in Ridership

According to U.S. Census Bureau data released in September 2011, bicycle commuting in Tucson increased 58 percent between 2009 and 2010, from 2 percent to 3 percent. The new percentage elevates Tucson from 12th to sixth highest in the country among the top 70 large U.S. cities for bicycle commuting. Tucson is within about a half percentage point of the four cities immediately above it, save for Portland, OR, which is at 6 percent.

People are commuting by bike more than ever in Tucson,” said Mary Reynolds, chair of the Platinum Challenge Task Force, who is also the community communications coordinator of the Town of Sahuarita. “The reasons are many... it reflects in part the City of Tucson’s work in doing low-cost, spot improvements to make it easier to get around by bike, and the beginning of a great network of bike boulevards and other bike facilities.

Perhaps even more significantly, the percentage of women commuters, the “indicator species” of bicycle friendliness, increased from 26.5 percent in 2009 to 35 percent in 2010. Recent developments that encourage more women to ride include bicycling groups like the Tucson Bicycle Belles; women-only bike classes at BICAS; the annual Cyclovia Tucson, and safer bike facilities and crossings of major arterials.

Top 3 Reasons

In its application to the LAB, the Platinum Challenge Task Force will communicate in detail all of the Tucson Region’s numerous programs and achievements that make it a platinum-worthy BFC, many elements of which have been covered in this article series.

The task force will build its case for platinum around three broad principles:

Region-wide Commitment. The Tucson Region is the only highly ranked region among BFCs, and is also the only current applicant that formed a platinum committee. The Regional Council of PAG unanimously adopted a resolution requesting all of its members to support the platinum application. The result has been smart investments, including more than 1000 miles of cycling infrastructure. Gold was achieved in 2008 with a goal of 5 percent by 2020, set by the Tucson-Pima Bicycle Advisory Committee (BAC); the development of a bike and pedestrian network in the Tucson; significant progress on Pima County’s 55-mile Urban Loop; numerous spot improvements; and, an emphasis on community involvement.

Pima County Administrator, Chuck Huckleberry, had this to say about the regional effort: “Pima County is home to hundreds of miles of bike paths and trails, and continues to commit millions of dollars each year to bicycle infrastructure... All the jurisdictions are working collaboratively to make biking transportation seamless between municipalities.”

Responsiveness. When the Tucson Region was re-designated gold in 2008, the LAB gave feedback in the form of a list of suggested improvements to attain platinum. In four years, the region has addressed many of the items on that list and made improvements in almost every area.

Improvements include: increased coordination with the smaller regional jurisdictions via their participation on the BAC; increased ridership, setting higher ridership goals, and improving analysis of ridership data; improving pedestrian education, cooperation by law enforcement, and bicycle crash rates, where fatalities have noticeably declined; extending the Bike Diversion Program to smaller and larger communities; improving the recycling system; and increasing the number of bike lanes.

An Education Powerhouse

Of the “Five Es” used to evaluate a BFC, the one that has not yet been covered in this series is one of the Tucson Region’s greatest strengths: Education. Since 2008, bicycle education programs have proliferated in both the public and private sectors, and have reached thousands of youth and adults across demographics.

Region-wide education efforts are spearheaded by the Pima County-City of Tucson Bike Ambassador Program, which is part of the Pima County-City of Tucson Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety Education Program. In 2008, the Bike Ambassador program is composed of ambassadors that are League Certified Instructors (LCIs) and non-certified assistants.

“Bike Ambassadors go out and teach League curriculum, traffic skills classes, and Bicycle Diversion Program classes, said Sheila Foraker, project manager of the Bike Ambassador program. “They also go to a wide variety of community and outreach activities, everything from a bike rodeo to a tabling event where they hand out bicycling information such as bike maps and Share the Road guides,” Foraker added.

The program is unique in two respects: 1) its scope – dozens of Bike Ambassadors serve every year, including youth ambassadors; and 2) Bike Ambassadors are paid directly out of grants and public transportation funds.

The program also includes the Bicycle Diversion Program that has been written about in this series, and was lauded by the LAB for its innovative approach to promoting bicycle safety and law enforcement. In 2010, ambassadors had contact with over 3,500 cyclists.

Safe Routes to School (SRTS) was instituted in the Tucson Region in 2003, two years before it became a nation-wide, federally funded program. Its goal is to improve the health and well-being of

children by encouraging them to bicycle and walk to school. The joint Pima County/City of Tucson program has a major education component. Since 2008, SRTS has expanded significantly in the region, and now teaches thousands of K-8 and middle school students how to safely bike and walk to school.

Underprivileged youth have increasing opportunities to learn bicycling and life skills, and acquire bikes and equipment, through a number of non-profit and independent programs in the region. The non-profit HI Group youth cycling club transforms the lives of dozens of underserved and youth every year, by teaching kids how to race road and mountain bikes as a team, and instilling in them an ethos of mentoring other riders and reducing cycling. In the summer of 2011, HI Group joined forces with BICAS to offer summer bicycle camps for kids, in which El Grupo Youth Bike Ambassadors helped out as camp counselors.

Funded by private sponsors and administered by ProActive Physical Therapy and Pyramid Coaching, Junior El Tour trains a group of underprivileged children to ride in the 42-mile El Tour de Tucson event, held annually in November. El Tour is a 150-mile cycling event that begins with dozens of training classes before every El Tour, as well as for its three other annual rides in southern and central Arizona. The Greater Arizona Bicycle Association (GABA) also hosts dozens of educational events throughout the year to provide bicycle training, maintenance, and repair for all age groups.

Each year, a bicyclist in the Tucson Region has literally hundreds of opportunities to learn more about how to safely ride and maintain a bicycle, in many instances for free.

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