

When it comes to being bicycle friendly, Morgantown has a lot going for it. Development around the city center allows people to live reasonably close to their workplace, making it easier to bike to work. The Rail Trail provides access across town, and streets within city limits typically have much lower traffic speed limits than the highways. West Virginia University also drives the need for infrastructure that accommodates a large number of pedestrians, and when pedestrians are accommodated, it generally makes things easier for cyclists.

Pair these characteristics with an enthusiastic community of cycling advocates continually pushing for new infrastructure, policy and resources, and you can understand why the City of Morgantown was named a bronze level Bicycle Friendly Community by the League of American Bicyclists – a rating granted to the City largely due to the efforts of the Morgantown Municipal Bicycle Board.

The Bike Board is an advisory board underneath the City of Morgantown's Traffic Commission that focuses its efforts on bicycle legislation, law enforcement, infrastructure and education in the community. It serves as a liaison between the public and the City, and its mission is to allow cyclists to ride in any place, anytime, anywhere without fear.

In 2012, the Bike Board developed a comprehensive plan encompassing everything it wanted to accomplish to make Morgantown a Bicycle Friendly City, ranging from proposed bike lanes and paths to education programs to methods used to collect and analyze data. The plan was proposed and accepted by Morgantown City Council in 2012 and ultimately helped earn the City its bronze rating. It also set the framework for improvements to promote cycling as an efficient mode of transportation.

Studies in larger metropolitan areas have shown that an increase in cycling as transportation leads to reduced traffic congestion, fewer parking issues, better air quality and better physical and mental health among commuters. Biking instead of driving even a few days each week can also save money over the course of a year.

When it comes to switching out your car for a bike, a little planning and flexibility can go a long way, say Bike Board members who regularly incorporate cycling into their transportation routine.

"People think they have to go cold turkey from the car," said Christina Hunt, the board's Third Ward representative. "It doesn't have to be either/or. You can do both."

Bicycles are less of a hassle to park and leave at work or at a bus stop than a car would be if the need arises, adding to their versatility.

"Just because you ride your bike into work, it doesn't mean you have to ride back," explained Chip Wamsley, Bike Board chair and owner of Wamsley Cycles in Morgantown. "And there are days you have to carry in your presentations, you have to carry or laptop or have to carry in your stock of food for the week - those days you drive your car. Then the rest of the time you can ride your bike. You mix it up and be flexible with your game plan."

Commuters who bike to work can easily incorporate public transportation or carpooling into their routine if they plan ahead and are familiar with their bus or train schedule, he continued.

“A lot of people don’t realize that Morgantown is really ahead of the curve in that every bus in our area in the Mountain Line Transit system has bike racks, and they have since maybe 1998.”

Getting into a new commuting routine may take some time, but cycling has a long list of benefits a car just can’t deliver.

Riding a bike in any form, commuting or otherwise, is exercise, and studies show that regular physical activity can reduce one’s overall risk of death from a number of ailments including heart disease, stroke, diabetes and even certain types of cancer. It also helps ward off weight gain and strengthens the body.

Cycling is associated with improved cardiovascular fitness and a decrease in coronary heart disease, which includes high blood pressure, stroke and heart attack, because it stimulates and strengthens the heart, lungs and circulatory system. A recent study conducted by Purdue University, for example, showed that incorporating regular bike riding sessions into their routine could reduce a person’s risk of heart disease by 50 percent. The British Heart Foundation also reports that nearly 10,000 fatal heart attacks can be prevented every year if people were more physically fit.

The act of riding a bike can also improve coordination since there are several movements happening all at once. Pedaling helps build and maintain muscles in the lower body, which helps reduce weight gain. As an added benefit, cycling burns a lot of calories and pumps up the metabolism even after getting off the bike.

It also continues to benefit the body by strengthening the immune system because moderate exercise makes immune cells more active and ready to fight off infection. In fact, a study from the University of North Carolina found that people who cycle for a half hour, five days each week tend to take around half as many sick days as their sedentary counterparts.

Cycling provides a low-impact workout for those dealing with joint issues and is easier on the knees than running or other high-impact exercises, and if it’s used as a mode of transportation, it can be an easy way to incorporate exercise into your everyday life.

“I was a runner in high school and then I found out that my knees just weren’t going to make it,” said Wamsley. “So I switched to cycling. It’s very kind to your body.”

Riding a bike isn’t just good for the body, though; it’s also good for the mind.

Most exercise releases endorphins in the brain that increase happy feelings and combat stress and depression. In fact, the University of Bern conducted a study recently that suggests exercise can cause the same changes in the brain as antidepressants.

In another study conducted by the Journal of Clinical and Diagnostic Research, scientists found that people scored higher on memory, reasoning and planning tests after they rode a stationary bicycle for 30 minutes. Cycling helps build new brain cells and neurons and promotes blood flow that brings in more oxygen to the brain, allowing it to function more efficiently.

“I’ll be tired in the morning, and even if I don’t have a cup of coffee, if I get on my bike it wakes me up all of the sudden and I can go on with my day,” said Drew Gatlin, the Bicycle Board’s secretary and daily bike commuter. “Getting the heart rate up, I think it really just improves everything.”

Ready to start pedaling?

It won't take much to get started - just a bike and a helmet at first.

While there are different types of bicycles intended for different activities – mountain biking, racing, commuting, etc. – they all need to fit properly to their rider. A well-fitting bike reduces the risk of injury and can make all the difference in terms of comfort while riding.

A good fit is important because a rider should “become one with the bike,” Wamsley explained.

“People come in all sizes and bikes come in all sizes, so getting a bicycle that is sized appropriately for a person and getting it adjusted so they can feel more like it's an extension of themselves,” he said.

Bike Board members recommend that new riders stop into a local bike shop for a fitting because, chances are, the employees will be confident and knowledgeable when making recommendations and helping fit a bike to a rider.

“Bike shops are a good resource in that the people in bike shops are really passionate about what they do and it's part of what we do,” Wamsley continued. “It's free information... I'll talk to someone as long as they'll willing to listen.”

Once the fit is correct, then accessories can be added to customize any bike. Front baskets or wracks, waterproof saddlebags, safety lights and other equipment can transform a bicycle to fit a commuter's needs, but new riders who want to get into cycling for transportation can start out with a simple backpack.

The rail trail is a low-key place to practice riding and gain confidence on a new bicycle, Hunt said, and new cyclists should practice riding on the road on days that bring in less traffic than a typical work day. It's important, even when just starting out, to think outside the box and switch up your commuting routine to make cycling work for your needs.

“Practice going from your house to your work, and take side streets,” Hunt recommended. “It's going to probably be different from how you would drive there.”

The Bicycle Board offers new commuters a chance to learn proper traffic skills, effective use of gears, basic bike maintenance and other techniques to get them started in a course called Confident City Cycling, which is taught through West Virginia University on a regular basis for both students and non-students.

Bike Board members also recommend finding a more experienced “bike buddy” to ride with who knows how to properly use gears and navigate the area. Cycling in a group setting is an easier way to gain confidence among inexperienced bicycle commuters.

Aside from the Bike Board, there are several other organizations in the region and around the state that can help integrate new riders into the cycling scene.

Positive Spin is a nonprofit community organization that works to repurpose and recycle old bicycles, and they teach people how to be self-sufficient regarding bike maintenance and practices. New cyclists can also earn a bike by working at the shop while simultaneously learning about bicycles.

There is also a Google Group called “Mon Bike Club” aimed to bring cyclists together to organize group rides.

“A lot of people get on there and say ‘hey, we’re doing this ride and we’re doing this ride,” Wamsley said. “It’s a beautiful day and I think I’m feeling a little sick today, so anyone else who’s feeling sick like me that wants to meet at the courthouse to go for a ride can do that.”

Country Roads Cyclists is another organized group that hosts regular rides on the rail trail, back roads and everywhere in between.

These and other organizations, as well as individual cyclists alike, can celebrate their bikes in May during National Bike Month.

In Morgantown, the community celebrates by promoting cycling through City Council proclamations and organizing group rides and other cycling events. This year, Bike to Work Day is May 20 as part of the longer Bike to Work Week May 16-20. There is also a Bike to School Day on May 4 for younger cyclists.

For more information on National Bike Month and how to get involved in organized rides, to enroll in Confident City Cycling, or to learn more about the Morgantown Municipal Bicycle Board, visit www.bikemorgantown.com.