



Promoting Safe Bicycle Travel Opportunities

FOR BICYCLE TOURISM AND
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

A collaboration of Tuolumne County, Stanislaus County, San Joaquin County,
Calaveras County, and Alpine County

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Executive Summary

The project, “Promoting Safe Bicycle Travel Opportunities for Bicycle Tourism and Economic Development,” started in the summer of 2019 as a Sustainable Transportation Planning Grant, thanks to funding by Senate Bill 1. Its many goals and objectives can be distilled into one main goal with two intentions.

The main goal is to make bicycling safer, especially on recreational routes. The two primary intentions are to (1) attract visitors and grow the tourism industry for economic development while (2) simultaneously enhancing the opportunity for local residents to enjoy equitable and safe bicycling for transportation and healthy recreation. Project leaders hope that political and social support for bicycling will increase when it’s connected to the economic health of the region. The Project found evidence for this assertion.

The strategy of the Project can also be simplified into two categories: (1) implement physical safety improvements to the roads and rights-of-way in the five counties; and (2) provide programmatic support for the growing efforts to attract bicyclists and support bicycle tourism. The strategy is based on the principle that if you build it, they will come, but more will come if you encourage them.

The Project started by developing an outreach plan that relied on attendance at dozens of public events throughout the five counties. Then the pandemic hit. Outreach

was stalled for several months until we realized that it would be necessary to change our outreach strategy. We developed an intensive digital outreach plan, including six online public video conferences, and conducted a scientifically valid survey to assess attitudes and opinions about our Project and its recommendations.

Analysis by the firm New Economics and Advisory looked at how the demographic and economic trends in bicycling might affect this region. Bicycling is booming as a result of high demand for socially distanced travel and recreation caused by the pandemic. Year-over-year bicycle sales increased by more than 60 percent. Recreational riding on bike trails doubled, according to the Rails to Trails Conservancy. Ten percent of Americans used a bicycle for the first time ever, or in a very long time.

Comparing bike racing events, to leisure riding, to non-competitive events, the analysis discovered that non-competitive events attract higher-income visitors than competitive events. Leisure riders tended to be local residents, with the exception of winery visitors.

The economic analysis presented ten priority “opportunities” to increase bicycle tourism across the five counties, and estimated increased spending by bicycle riders as a result of the improvements proposed in this Project.

A medium estimate of 40% increase in bicycle tourism resulted in the following values per county:

- Alpine County \$367,000
- Calaveras County \$483,000
- San Joaquin County \$2.8 million
- Stanislaus County \$517,000
- Tuolumne County \$97,000

The benefits of new forms of healthy recreation and transportation will have even huger economic benefits when you consider health cost savings. Altogether, the **health care cost savings from increased physical activity** by local residents, assuming a medium increase, **amount to a staggering \$16 million each year.**

To inform the decisions about priority improvements, the Project produced a report of best practices in bicycle tourism. There are four types of bicycling that can be considered touristic:

- Self-supported, where bicycling travelers make their own way from place to place
- Destination-based, where tourists converge on a particular place as a “home base” for bicycling-based recreation
- Events, which specifically attract tourists for a bike ride or related event
- Casual cycling, which refers to bicycling enjoyed as an important but not necessarily integral part of a trip

Emphasizing the importance of identifying a region’s strengths, the report led the Project Steering Committee to recommend destination-based and event-based strategies to attract bicycle tourists. The region does not lend itself to long distance self-supported touring like the California coast does, but there are many areas that would benefit from improvements to attract bicyclists to their natural beauty and rich cultural resources.

The Project also assessed the impediments to bicycle tourism in the region. We did that through qualitative surveys of local leaders, and a survey of a representative sample of residents of the region (n=360) plus about 100 cyclists in the region. The respondents provided a valuable perspective on what stands in the

way of promoting more bicycling, and what obstacles we may encounter as we implement the plan.

The survey asked motorists what frustrates them about bike riders. The survey suggested complaints based on cultural attitudes toward “bicyclists” (e.g. “general superior attitude”) and on behavior of cyclists (e.g. “not stopping at stop signs”). Cultural attitudes are not a barrier, we found, but bicyclists’ behavior is. Specifically, “riding erratically and swerving” was the most highly ranked frustration experienced by motorists around bicyclists. Gratefully, this can be addressed by physical improvements, education, and signage to reduce the behavior.

Importantly, the survey found significant public approval of improvements to bicycling for tourism purposes. Prior to learning of our proposals, 29% of respondents had neutral or not favorable opinions of “state and local programs to attract more people to the region to ride bikes.” But after learning of our proposals, fully a third of those respondents changed their mind, joining the 81.4% of people who have favorable opinions of our proposals generally.

The survey confirmed that our Project’s choices for physical improvements reflect public demand for bicycle infrastructure. The most popular improvements were “more off-road trails along canals, aqueducts, and rivers.” Our Project recommends four off-road trails. “Smooth pavement to create loops on quiet back roads” also ranked highly, supporting the Project’s recommendations. “Wider shoulders on the main highways” ranked much lower among bicyclists and non-bicyclists who took the survey. The Project does recommend wider shoulders on a very small proportion of roadways where the shoulders will connect to other quiet back roads.

Research conducted as part of this Project, and a review of other active transportation plans and projects, have led to this Project’s numerous recommendations for infrastructure safety improvements. We recommend a “signature project” plus a number of supportive projects in each of the five counties. Taken together, these will help to transform the region into an attractive place for residents and visitors alike to enjoy bicycling.

The signature projects are all trails:

- **EBMUD Pipeline Trail from Stockton to Lake Camanche.** This would provide a car-free connection to the popular and varied recreational opportunities at Lake Camanche for the residents of Stockton, to

the residents of Lodi with a short bike ride, and to the millions of people who live along Amtrak's San Joaquin corridor.

- **Stanislaus River Trail from Oakdale to Knights Ferry.** This scenic route would follow the curves of the river, connecting people to the many recreational attractions already available along the river.
- **Sierra Railroad Trail from Jamestown to Sonora.** This will strengthen the appeal of the tourist attractions in each of these downtowns by connecting them to each other via a new 4-mile, Class 1 multi-use trail.
- **Angels Creek Trail from Murphys Grade Road near Angels Camp to New Melones Reservoir.** This 5.1-mile trail along Angels would offer active access to wine tasting, cavern excursions, outdoor adventures, and world-famous cultural events like the Jumping Frog Jubilee.
- **Old Luther Pass Road Trail.** Converting a mere 2.1 miles of a dilapidated former roadway to a modern bike trail would create a "magical" new route for cyclists in this already-popular county for recreational cycling.

Each signature project is supplemented by 5-6 strategically chosen supportive projects that will substantially improve the region for biking. These include limited recommendations for shoulder widening, traffic calming to slow vehicles on low-traffic streets, intersection improvements where bike routes cross busy highways, and key amenities like bike parking and signage.

To complement the infrastructural recommendations, this Project makes a number of policy and programmatic recommendations. Policy recommendations relate to rumble strips and signage. Programmatic recommendations relate to events and practices we think will bolster growth and interest in bicycling and help to maintain the momentum gained in the past year.

While effective at preventing run-off-the-road collisions, rumble strips can turn a great road for biking into a frightening hazard. Nationally, a great deal of debate has landed on a set of practices that balances the needs of all road users. Caltrans policy does not perfectly adhere to these best practices. We make recommendations for changes to the rumble strip standards that will better protect the utility of a road for safe bicycling. The

recommendations would limit the routine use of rumble strips on roads with narrow shoulders, require signage wherever safety calls for applying those rumble strips even where there are narrow shoulders, and involve the public more in the decisions about rumble strips.

Signage recommendations would clarify that "sharing the road" means that bike riders are entitled to use the full lane when necessary. This should help motorists understand that bike riders aren't being unpredictable or deliberately rude when they fail to ride at the right edge of the roadway. We make recommendations for encouraging bicyclists to move over to let traffic pass at the soonest opportunity.

An important program to help sustain the effort is the development of the bikevalleytosierra.com website. It has already attracted hundreds of followers and should continue to serve as an important resource and clearing-house for information on routes, activities, and events.

We recommend that Caltrans sponsor an annual bike ride on Ebbetts Pass each spring, when the road is closed to cars but open to the public. Such an event would highlight Caltrans' critical role in keeping our highways open, and promote bicycling as a healthy activity for the residents of this region. Formalizing what is already happening informally would allow for promotion and support the economic development goals of this Project.

Finally in the category of programmatic support, we have developed several resources that should help the region attract thousands of bicycle tourists. A Toolkit for Organizers of Bike Rides is a step-by-step manual for anyone who wants to sponsor a bike ride to raise money for local charities or projects. A Toolkit for Businesses is a how-to manual for businesses that want to be known as bicycle-friendly. All of these resources are provided online, and, in printed format, as appendices in this document.

This plan provides tools and resources to help communities, residents, businesses, and stakeholders consider an approach to economic development that is inclusive and supportive of active transportation. As one resident put it, "we have many of the pieces in place already - we just need to put them together." It is our hope that this plan will represent the first of many efforts to develop a robust, equitable, and community-supported approach to bicycle tourism.