



Making the grade

Experts and riders agree: Buffalo has come a long way in its quest to become a platinum biking city

By Matt Chandler



After what felt like an eternal winter, even by Western New York standards, Buffalo riders have finally broken out their bikes and hit the open roads. Buffalo and its surrounding suburbs now boast some of the best trail and street riding to be found anywhere in the Northeast.

It hasn't always been that way. It wasn't that long ago that Buffalo languished behind most of America when it came to bikeable cities. But all that changed thanks to the work of advocates in the cycling community, a responsive city government, and an influx of riders in the Western New York region.

Justin Booth, executive director of Go Bike Buffalo, the group that has led the fight to increase the city's bikeability, says Buffalo has "evolved and continues to evolve" in respect to attitudes, policies, and initiatives toward the sport and those who enjoy it.

"We engaged the city in this conversation because we know that when more people in a city ride their bikes, you have better air quality, healthier residents, and an overall quality of life," Booth notes. He adds that the process of transforming Buffalo into a truly bikeable city has taken time, and it's a transformation that is far from over. "When the city was designed, it was all about getting cars from point A to point B," he says. "Now, a lot of work has been done to adapt that design and improve the city for riders and a lot of the credit goes to the city for its efforts."

Those efforts have been led by the administration of Mayor Byron Brown. Brown has been a strong voice for integrating biking into the city and has pushed to add as many as ten miles of bike lanes to the city each year.

"Several years ago, we decided to adopt a complex strategic plan to reinvent and revitalize the City of Buffalo," Brown says. "In terms of making bikes part of that plan, we looked at Best Practices in other cities, and we found that cities that were more bike-friendly were more effective in retaining young people and drawing people to live in the city."

A family on wheels

Jeff Bettinger and his wife Lisa have been riding together for more than seven years, and Bettinger contends there is no better place to ride than in the heart of the city. "People tend to think about the suburbs," he says, "but Elmwood and Delaware Avenues are pretty bike-friendly."

Bettinger and his wife bike the city not just for pleasure, but also for practicality—biking to dinner, to visit friends, and to run errands. "We were considering other cities to move to and we chose to stay here, in part, because of the bikeability of the city," he says. "I think the city's commitment to bike riding is impressive, and it is only getting better."

It's a factor that was amplified with the birth of the couple's twin boys, Jack and Brendan, two years ago. Rather than allowing parenthood to curtail their riding, the Bettingers found a product called the Wee-Ride. It's a child seat that straps to the front of the bike, leaving the boys with a great view of the action and Jeff and Lisa with the freedom to ride. "We have had them on the bikes since they were six months old," Bettinger says. "We ride with them all over the city and the bike lanes are definitely a big factor in being able to do that."

How Buffalo ranks

Buffalo's efforts haven't gone unnoticed on the national stage. Though biking year-round in a city known for its harsh winters has its drawbacks, the League of American Bicyclists ranked the Queen City the third most popular "coldest cities" for biking and sixth among the "snowiest cities in America" for cyclists.

The idea of national prominence as a means to revitalize a city isn't lost on Mayor Brown, who factored that into the city's master bike plan. "Buffalo earned a Bronze ranking from the League of American Bicyclists for 2013," he says. "While it is gratifying to see that the work we

are doing is being nationally recognized, one of our goals is to continue with our efforts and earn a platinum-level status."

Robert Johnson is the president of the Buffalo Bicycling Club. He said the improved bikeability of the city can be traced back to not only the work of the city government, but also the business community and police and fire departments.

"We are part of a lot of bike races in the city and Buffalo is very cooperative in terms of everything from permits to police support," Johnson says. "There is also a lot of support from the business community—places like Larkinville have really stepped up to support our events."

Johnson affirms that proof of Buffalo's improved bikeability can be found in the number of riders taking to the streets of the city and the increase in the number of events being held in and around Buffalo. "There used to be just a few signature events," he says. "Now, in addition to the Ride for Roswell and the Tour De Cure, you've got so many more. We just had the Skyride (the inaugural event in May drew more than 800 riders) and we have the Larkinville Challenge, which we operate Thursday nights in May and June. So, there is a lot happening in the city."

Trails and rural routes

While the focus of the biking community may be on the city, rural riders also give Western New York high marks for its bikeability.

As the vice-president of marketing, sales, and product development for Buffalo Games, Ben Jamesson spends plenty of time in the city. But when it's time to strap on his helmet and ride, Jamesson prefers the rural roads in and around his hometown of Holland. "I began racing back when I was ten," Jamesson says. "I was a really avid road racer and even traveled to Italy for a couple of summers to race."

While the country roads of Western New York are a long way from his world of competitive racing, Jamesson still logs twenty to thirty miles several times a week and says those who haven't given the rural routes of southern Erie County a try are missing out on some incredible riding. "The back roads are beautiful, the scenery is just incredible," he enthuses.

But there is also another element

to the rural routes that Jamesson says earns high marks for bikeability—safety. "It's the number one thing on my mind now," he says. "You are a little more vulnerable out there [on open roads] so I like to choose routes where I know there won't be a lot of traffic."

That describes most of the back roads in southern Erie and Cattaraugus Counties, where Jamesson does much of his riding, because, as he notes, "Cattaraugus County is even more rural, and, to me, more beautiful in a way."

From the bike trails winding along Lake Erie to the enhanced bike lanes marking downtown Buffalo, from the rural roads of the eight counties of Western New York to the off-road mountain biking options, one thing everyone seems to agree on is that Buffalo is on the fast track to becoming an elite city for cyclists.

Matt Chandler is a freelance writer from Buffalo.



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HAPPY TRAILS

We asked riders from across the region to give us their "A+ ride." We wanted to know: if you've got one Sunday afternoon to strap on your helmet and hit the road, where are you headed? Take a read and if you haven't conquered these routes yet, consider giving one of them a try on your next trek.



Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor: A+ for Best Views. This scenic trail runs more than 350 miles from Buffalo through Rochester, Syracuse, and Albany. But it's the Western New York section that will wind you along the waterways of the region and offer you a largely level ride, making this trail a viable option for the less experienced rider. The drawback—some portions of the route are on the open road, so study your course ahead of time and plan properly for a great day of biking.

Delaware Park Bike Loop: A+ for Safest in the City. Many potential riders cite safety concerns as a reason they either don't ride at all or don't ride as often as they would like. Navigating the city streets on a bike can be intimidating, especially for a new rider. Delaware Park offers a 1.75-mile multi-purpose loop in the city that is safe but populated. The path, which circles the Delaware Park Golf Course, offers riders a low-stress ride without making a trip out to the suburbs.

Chestnut Ridge Park: A+ for Most Family-Friendly Ride. This 1,200-acre park in Orchard Park is known for its winter sledding, but it's the bike trails that should catch your attention this summer. Whether you choose the breathtaking view from high atop the open park, or the challenging rides along the wooded trails, pack a lunch and plan to spend the day exploring this expansive park on your bike. Pedal your way up to the Eternal Flame Falls, bring along your Frisbee golf discs, and you're in for a fun-filled day.

Clarence Pathways: A+ for Best Ride for Beginner Riders. Cyclists in the Northtowns may already be familiar with the trails that comprise the Clarence Pathways trail system, but if you aren't, you'll want to give them a ride this summer. Choose from four trails of varying distance and difficulty: the West Shore Trail (3.5 miles); Newstead Bike Path (4.8 miles); the Peanut Line Trail (2.3 miles); and the longest of the bunch, the 6.1 mile Clarence Bike Trail. Tackle them all, and you've got yourself the perfect Sunday afternoon on the bike.

59: Current miles of bike lanes in the city

70: Expected number of miles of lanes by the end of 2014

120: Expected number of miles of lanes by the end of 2016

14: Buffalo's national ranking of cities with the most bicycle commuters

9: The city is ranked as the ninth most popular city in the Eastern United States for bicycling

6: The Queen City is ranked as the sixth fastest-growing city in America for bicycle commuting

Sources: Bike lane statistics provided by Mayor Byron Brown's office. National rankings provided by The League of American Bicyclists, based on 2012 US Census data.

BY THE NUMBERS





This page: Lisa and Jeff Bettinger with twins Jack and Brendan; Opposite: Mayor Byron Brown with Justin Booth and other biking advocates and enthusiasts





RESULTS

How does Buffalo stack up in the eyes of those in the know when it comes to being a bike-friendly community? These grades represent a composite of the marks given by all those interviewed for this story:



A-

Quality of bike paths

Not only does Buffalo have well-maintained bike paths, but also there are plenty of them, and they offer some of the most spectacular views around. Whether you are in the Southtowns and want to explore Chestnut Ridge Park or you want to ride the trails along Lake Erie through the city, the scenery is as much the enjoyment as the ride itself. For everyone from novice cyclists to expert mountain bikers, the region offers a diverse range of quality trails.

B+

Quantity of on-road bike lanes

This is a grade that has been on the rise in recent years and is only going to go higher. Led by Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown, the city is on a mission to add 10 miles of marked bike lanes every year. It's all part of a master plan to encourage residents to commute via bicycle, improve air quality, promote good health, and encourage more people to stay/relocate to Buffalo.

C+

Safety

Everyone we spoke to emphasized the importance of bike safety. The city is working toward optimal safety by creating bike lanes and better signage to warn drivers. Thousands of potential riders in Western New York are held back by safety concerns. Buffalo is working in the right direction, but there is more to be done.

B

Public opinion of cycling

Given Americans' desire to find creative ways to fit exercise into busy schedules, coupled with the rising cost of gas and the headaches of urban car ownership, biking has become an increasingly attractive option, especially for the younger generations. But in Buffalo, as with many places, we are often slow to adapt. Drivers navigating the congested streets of the city and the fast-moving streets in the suburbs have yet to catch on to the increase in bicycle traffic. Failure to yield to bicyclists can be dangerous and, while the municipalities are doing their parts, as a whole, drivers need to accept that the road isn't just for cars anymore. Once they do, this grade will rise, and we will all be safer on the roads.