



MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

Safer bike lanes to debut in Miami and South Beach. Will regular folks jump on?

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The white plastic poles that sprung up a couple of weeks ago along a block of West Avenue in South Beach don't look like much. But they mark the very first protected bike lane in Miami-Dade, a modest change that may well herald a broader transformation in the way streets are designed in urban centers around the county.

Such protected bikeways — that is, on-street lanes that are separated from motorized traffic by poles, curbs or some other barrier — have rapidly proliferated in cities big and small around the country. Planners and city leaders looking to foster cycling for transportation, recreation and traffic relief now see them as the key to making regular folks feel safe enough to venture out on busy streets on a bike.

As usual, metro Miami is late to the urban-innovation party. But Miamians can expect protected lanes to begin popping up in the near future not just in South Beach, but also in downtown Miami, Wynwood and possibly even Cutler Bay. County and municipal transportation planners are pressing ahead in those areas with projects that aim to improve safety and access for cyclists in one of the most dangerous places in the nation to pedal a bike.

Starting next week, crews will begin retrofitting downtown Miami's Southeast and Southwest First Street, which stretches half a mile between the Miami-Dade government center and Biscayne Boulevard, with a protected bike lane, as well as an exclusive bus lane. The street redo is part of a "complete streets" pilot project that the Downtown Development Authority, the city and county planners intend to replicate on surrounding blocks.

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“This is really important,” said Coconut Grove bike activist Hank Sanchez-Resnik. “It really could be the tipping point for cycling in Miami. More and more, when I meet people in the public, they tell me they’re afraid of biking in Miami. We have to create an environment where people aren’t afraid to bike.”

Miami Beach, which has moved quickly to implement a comprehensive bike and pedestrian plan approved by the city commission last year, is leading the way. As West Avenue is gradually rebuilt and raised to stave off inundation from sea-level rise, crews will be installing protected bike lanes going both north and south between Lincoln Road and Eighth Street. For now, the new protected lane is limited to the block south of 17th Street.

Some sections of the rebuilt West Avenue will feature another safeguard that’s increasingly common around the country, though still novel to South Florida: bike lanes nestled between sidewalk and parked cars, which act as a safety buffer for cyclists from moving traffic.



A bike lane in Portland, Ore., is protected by parked cars from moving traffic. Miami Beach will install parking-protected lanes on West Avenue and Euclid Avenue on South Beach.

That same approach will be used later this year on nearby Euclid Avenue, where a car lane will be narrowed to make room for a parking-protected bike lane. The city will also embark on a demonstration project using temporary barriers like planters to demarcate bike lanes in North Beach as it maps out a revitalization of that neighborhood’s commercial center. Within 10 years, Miami Beach plans to have 23 miles of protected bike lanes.

Unlike some painted bike lanes, the new separated lanes won’t stand in isolation or dead-end abruptly, which limits their utility and appeal. Under the 20-year master plan by consultant Street Plans Collaborative, they will be part of a network of bikeways, including existing conventional bike lanes, as well as improved pedestrian crossings and links. That connectivity, planners say, will allow people to get around the traffic-choked Beach conveniently and safely without a car.

“We’re definitely moving quickly on these, but the work has only just begun,” said Beach transportation director Jose Gonzalez.

The Beach is also improving existing bike lanes that are marked off by just a white stripe. Lanes are being painted green, and in some cases demarcated by broader, striped buffer zones — another approach that experts say better alerts motorists to watch out for cyclists and stay out of lanes designated for them.

Among the roadways that will get the green bike-lane treatment, Gonzalez said: Miami Beach's half of the Venetian Causeway, a heavily traveled cycling route.

The protected lanes, planners say, will increase the proportion of bike users, a necessity because streets on the narrow peninsula have little capacity to handle additional auto and truck traffic.

"Somebody had to take that first leap, and Miami Beach as our cycling mecca was the most appropriate to take that on," said Street Plans principal Tony Garcia, referring to the protected bike lanes. "The city is going for it in a big way."

Cities that have installed protected bike lanes around the U.S. have seen big jumps in bike use as many urban dwellers, particularly the young, demand alternatives to getting around by automobile, research shows. Hundreds of miles have been installed in cities ranging from New York, Chicago and San Francisco to Sunbelt burbs like Dallas, Austin and Atlanta, according to an inventory maintained by People for Bikes, a national advocacy group. Even Tallahassee has them now.



A bike lane in San Francisco sports green paint and is separated from motorized traffic by plastic tubes.

Planners in U.S. cities began turning to protected lanes in recent years amid mounting evidence that bike lanes consisting of just paint were failing to encourage cycling or to adequately protect cyclists. Separated lanes, like those pioneered in bike-friendly European cities like Amsterdam and Copenhagen in the 1970s and 1980s, have proven critical, Danish cycling proselytizer Mikael Colville-Andersen told Miami audiences during a

February visit.

The installation of protected bike lanes can draw opposition because they typically require a reduction in on-street parking or narrowing or eliminating motorized traffic lanes. But that's usually a good thing, planners say, because many U.S. urban streets are too wide and designed to help cars move fast — a significant factor in crashes that injure or kill cyclists, pedestrians and even motorists, particularly the case in Florida. Injury and fatality rates for cyclists and pedestrians in Miami, Tampa and Orlando are among the nation's very worst, and experts say unsafe street and road design is the chief culprit.

Reducing space for cars increases safety for all road users, including pedestrians, by slowing down motorized traffic, research shows. And that can even improve traffic flow because cars can travel closer together at a steadier pace, experts say.

That's already happening on streets in the Beach where bike lanes were repainted green, Gonzalez said.

"What's really interesting is that green bike lanes are a win-win," he said. "In streets where we painted, the community has seen traffic traveling at a lower speed. Motorists see the green, they see less black asphalt and they know they are not to travel in that part, and that seems to have a traffic-calming effect."

In downtown Miami, planners hope to create a compact network of protected bike lanes. Those could follow a strategy outlined for the First Street pilot project, a redesign that aims to improve safety and convenience for all users by putting pedestrians, cyclists and bus riders on an equal footing with motorists.



That \$500,000 project entails reducing automobile lanes on the one-way eastbound street, which planners say does not carry a heavy traffic load, from three to one. That blueprint preserves on-street parking while making room for a green-painted bike lane delineated by plastic tubes and a bus-only lane painted in red, DDA planners Patrice Gillespie Smith and Fabian De La Espriella said. The posted speed limit will drop from 30 mph to 25 mph, and improved pedestrian crossings will get hard-to-miss zebra striping.

The county Transportation Planning Organization, meanwhile, is looking at North Miami Avenue and Northeast First Avenue as north-south routes with protected bike lanes, and at Fifth and Sixth streets for east and west routes.

That hoped-for downtown network could eventually connect downtown to Wynwood via protected bike lanes. The county water and sewer agency will install protected bike lanes as part of an already-launched project for new lines along North Miami Avenue in Wynwood, from Northwest 20th Street to Northwest 29th Street, said city bicycle coordinator Collin Worth.

Just south of that, the Omni Community Redevelopment Agency wants to install protected lanes in a parking-protected “cycletrack” — a two-way bikeway — along North Miami Avenue.

That connectivity, Sanchez-Resnik said, is essential. Without it, no one will use the bike lanes.

“We really need the county to do it in a way that’s going to succeed. That means bike lanes that have real protection, that are connected to destinations, that don’t start in the middle of nowhere and dump people into traffic,” he said, noting that the Beach seems to be doing it right. “They’re making great progress and really showing the way for other cities.”

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