



Photo Credit: Cian Ginty

Bike Freeways

Hillary Beattie

Introduction

Bike freeways are long-distance bicycle routes that are comfortable and safe for people of all ages and abilities. They usually have minimal intersections, high-quality surfaces that are wide enough for two bikes, adequate lighting, and consistent branding. Bike freeways also have rest areas and services along the route.¹ Electric bikes are becoming increasingly popular on bike freeways. In recent years, several European countries have built bike freeways. This pamphlet explores these precedents and includes recommendations for communities in rural Manitoba.



Distance

Long distance routes that are a minimum of five kilometres



Intersections

Limited intersections with underpasses and overpasses



Surface

High-quality surfaces to ensure smooth riding conditions



Width

Wide enough paths to allow cyclists to comfortably pass



Branding

Consistent branding along the route to guide cyclists



Lighting

Appropriate lighting to support night-time riding



Rest Areas

Regular rest areas with benches and water fountains



Services

Air pumps and basic tools for minor repairs along route



Photo Credit: Cian Ginty

Figure 1: The RijnWaalpad bicycle freeway that connects Arnhem and Nijmegen in the Netherlands.

Cycling and Older Adults

Transportation is a challenge for many older adults in rural Manitoba. Seniors who cannot drive or do not have a vehicle have to rely on Handi-Transit services or rides from family and friends. Without more transportation options, some seniors find it difficult to access amenities, attend appointments, or socialize with others. Many older adults also suffer from chronic diseases including cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cognitive decline. Moderate forms of physical activity like biking can help prevent or delay these diseases. For these reasons, cycling may appeal to many older adults. However, many seniors are only comfortable cycling on separated bike infrastructure.² Given this, bike freeways may appeal to older adults in rural Manitoba.

Bike Freeway Precedents

In the last decade, several European countries have built bike freeways to reduce vehicular traffic and encourage more people to bicycle. Some of these freeways are designed to connect inner-city areas with suburban neighbourhoods. For example, London has built a series of bike freeways to connect the central city with suburban boroughs since 2010. In roughly the same period, Denmark built 8 bike freeway routes in their capital region that are a combined 167 kilometres long. By 2045, they plan to build a total of 45 bike freeways in the region (see Figures 4 and 5).³

In other cases, the bike freeways connect cities across a region. For example, a 16-kilometre bike freeway called the RijnWaalpad connects the cities of Arnhem and Nijmegen in the Netherlands (see Figure 1).⁴ Germany is also building multiple bike freeways, including a 100-kilometre route known as the RS1 between the cities



Photo Credit: Alamy Stock Photo.

Figure 2: A bike freeway in the Ruhr district of Germany.



Photo Credit: Alamy Stock Photo.

Figure 3: A bike freeway in the Ruhr district of Germany.



Photo Credit: Franz-Michael Mellbin

Figure 4: A bike freeway in Glostrup, Denmark.



Photo Credit: Topos Magazine

Figure 5: The 'Bicycle Snake' bike freeway in Copenhagen, Denmark.

of Hamm and Duisburg in the Ruhr district (see Figures 2, 3, and 7).⁵ These examples highlight the viability of long-distance bike routes within or between communities.

Electric Bicycles

One challenge with bike freeways is that many residents, particularly older adults, may not be comfortable biking long distances. Electric bikes, also known as e-bikes, can help address this issue. While the designs vary, e-bikes contain a small electric motor that assist users with pedaling (see Figure 6). This assistance allows older adults to comfortably travel long distances while still engaging in moderate exercise.⁶

In recent years, the e-bike market has drastically increased in several countries including Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States.⁷ This suggests e-bikes have the potential to transform the way older adults move around.



Photo Credit: The Guardian

Figure 6: A senior riding an e-bike in the United Kingdom.

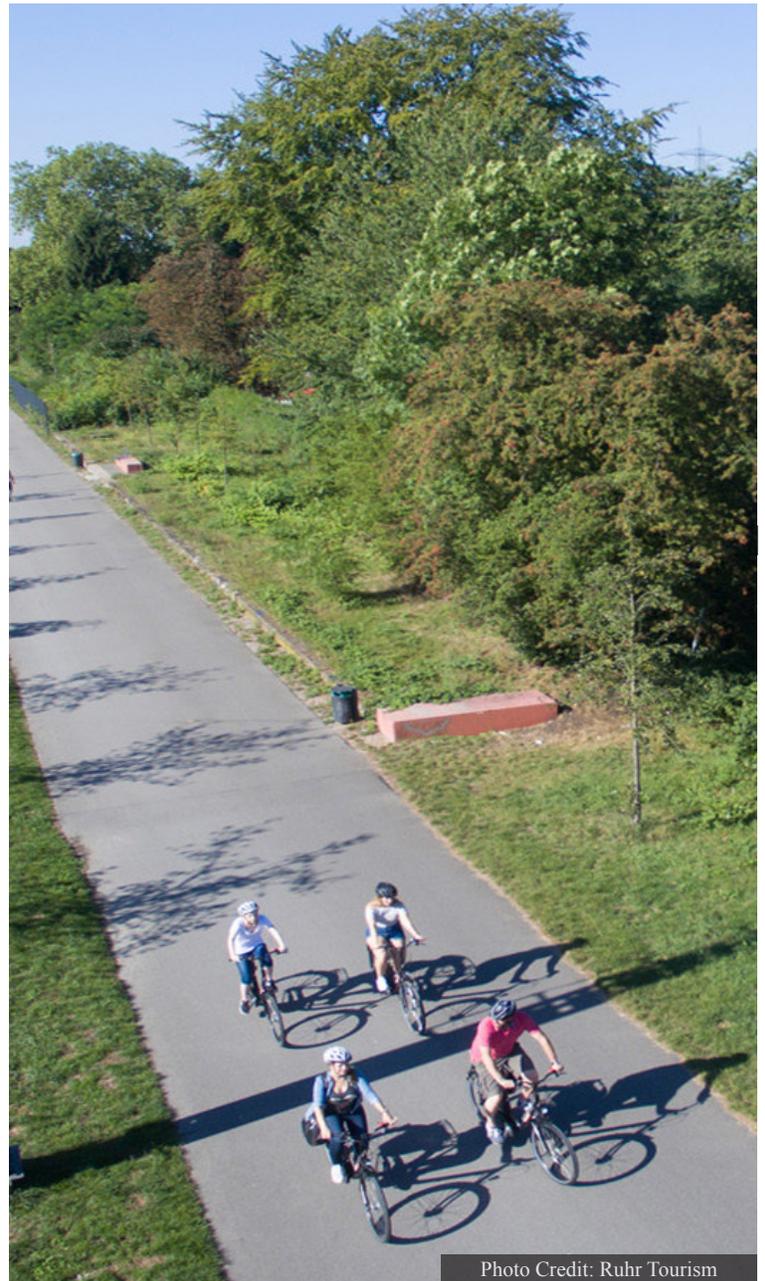


Photo Credit: Ruhr Tourism

Figure 7: A bike freeway on a former railway line in the Ruhr district of Germany.

Recommendations for Manitoba

Based on these precedents, I recommend that the Province of Manitoba conduct feasibility studies on the development of bike freeways as well as policies to promote electric bikes. Bike freeways could build off of existing pathways like the Great Trail, which runs across Manitoba. The freeways could connect towns in the rural municipalities of Hamiota, Harrison Park, Rossburn, Russell-Binscarth, and Yellowhead, which all contain a higher proportion of aging residents than the province as a whole.

The province could also promote the use of electric bikes through tax incentives, investments in charging stations, and public marketing campaigns. The development of new bike freeways and the promotion of electric bikes could provide older adults with more opportunities to run errands, stay active, and attend social gatherings.

References

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