

Questions and Answers about Iowa's Bicycle & Pedestrian Long-Range Plan

Why are we doing this planning process?

Our mission is to provide a transportation system that gets people there safely, conveniently, and efficiently. Walking and bicycling are proven ways to improve the quality of life for Iowa's citizens, providing an essential option for people to reach their destinations. To ensure we remain able to meet our mission over time, we continually evaluate the needs of all users of the transportation system, including bicyclists and pedestrians. In examining these needs, initial stakeholder and public input identified three key objectives for this plan. The plan should:

1. Serve as the primary guide for Iowa DOT decision-making regarding bicycle and pedestrian programs and facilities.
2. Help achieve improved project-level coordination within the Iowa DOT.
3. Provide consistency and mobility for bicycle and pedestrian users statewide.

What is the most important aspect of this plan?

This is a draft plan and we are not at the point of implementation yet. However, if the draft plan were implemented, the most critical concept outlined is the idea of mainstreaming safe bicycling and pedestrian accommodations. That means that as part of our multimodal mission and our regular business practices, we are recommending that bicycle and pedestrian accommodations be considered in the design and scope for all transportation projects that involve new or improved facilities unless it's demonstrated that accommodation is not needed. Currently, we typically only consider bicycle and/or pedestrian accommodations when a need is demonstrated or when promoted by external stakeholders. As discussed below, this shift would align our policy with federal regulations that require bicycle and pedestrian accommodations be considered in every project that involves a new or improved facility.

It's important to note that this doesn't mean that bicycle and pedestrian accommodations will be a part of all transportation projects. There are circumstances where that would not be advisable for reasons such as safety or low current or future demand for bicycle and pedestrian use, and specific exclusions are recommended

where bicycle or pedestrian use is prohibited on the transportation facility; the transportation facility has a posted minimum speed limit; right-of-way acquisition would be necessary to provide bicycle or pedestrian accommodations; the project scope is limited to maintenance activity (in other words the project does not involve a new facility or an improved facility); or the provision of the accommodations is otherwise limited by the Iowa Code or by Iowa DOT administrative rules. This plan will help us consistently identify and evaluate cases where it would not be wise to implement those accommodations, so we neither under-include or over-include reasonable accommodations for bicycles and pedestrians. Our overall goal is a flexible approach that balances the needs of all users.

How was the plan developed?

Two advisory committees, one technical and one policy-oriented, have been active in determining and shaping the plan's goals and direction. Committee representation included cities and counties, Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs), Regional Planning Affiliations (RPAs), Iowa Bicycle Coalition, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, Iowa Department of Public Health, and Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation. Each committee has reviewed analysis findings, policy recommendations, and priorities.

Additionally, meetings were held across the state in Des Moines, Mason City, Sioux City, Atlantic, Fairfield, and Cedar Rapids, which involved Iowa DOT District staff, area MPO and RPA staff, and members of the public. Public attendance at these meetings totaled 227 people with nearly 800 comments received.

Input from committee members, the public, and key stakeholders was instrumental in shaping the plans goals and key objectives. We now are asking for additional public input on the plan itself.

How long are you accepting comments and what will you do with the comments once you receive them?

The comment period will be open through the month of August. We will evaluate each comment to gather any information that hasn't already been considered throughout the plan development process. We will take all comments into consideration as we draft the final plan. It is anticipated that a summary of public input will be presented to the Iowa Transportation Commission in early Fall.

Why would we want to consider improvements to bicycle and pedestrian facilities?

Walking and bicycling provide an essential option for people to get to work, school, and other destinations. In addition, Iowa's landscape and natural beauty make it a great place for recreational riding and walking.

According to the 2017 National Household Travel Survey, nearly 10 percent of all trips in Iowa are made by biking or walking, representing a significant share of travel that we must plan for as part of our overall transportation network.

Since 1974, when the Iowa Highway Commission became the Iowa Department of Transportation, we have had a multimodal mission to achieve a more balanced transportation system. Bicycle and pedestrian facilities are a critical component of that system. Federal law requires state departments of transportation to consider bicycle and pedestrian accommodations on all new construction and reconstruction projects, and requires a presumption that bicyclists, pedestrians, and persons with disabilities will be accommodated in the design of new and improved transportation facilities – federal guidance on this requirement states that bicyclists and pedestrian accommodations should be included in the planning, design, and operation of transportation facilities, as a matter of routine, and the decision to not accommodate them should be the exception rather than the rule. Additionally, the Code of Iowa grants bicyclists the same “rights and duties applicable to the driver of a vehicle.” Bicyclists are legally allowed to ride their bicycles on public roads unless they have been specifically excluded (Iowa does not allow bicyclists or pedestrians to use the Interstate Highway system, four-lane divided roadways with posted minimum speed limits, or where prohibited by local ordinance), and for that reason it's important to consider their safe accommodation as legal road users.

As we plan the transportation network, we must consider the mobility and safety of all users. The design of a safe roadway will differ depending on vehicle speed, traffic volume, and surrounding land uses. It is also important to consider nearby destinations and the needs of those who are trying to access those destinations by foot or by bike (e.g., a school, park, senior center, transit station, etc.).

Where does the money for these improvements come from?

The source of funding for bicycle and pedestrian facilities varies by project, and could come from local, state, or federal sources. Regardless of the source, the most economical way to provide these facilities would be to construct them as part of larger projects, such as a highway reconstruction project. In such cases, it's expected that costs for the bicycle and/or pedestrian accommodation would be incorporated into the total project costs.

Who is responsible for Iowa's existing bicycle and pedestrian facilities?

Municipalities, MPOs, and RPAs have the responsibility to plan bicycle and pedestrian systems within their jurisdictions. Almost invariably, the plans require infrastructure changes on U.S. and state highways under Iowa

DOT's jurisdiction. This necessitates increased coordination between these parties, the Iowa DOT, and other interested stakeholders.

The jurisdiction over multi-use trails (MUTs), in contrast, is typically tied to location. MUTs in and around cities are typically the responsibility of municipalities, and MUTs in rural areas are typically the responsibility of counties. In addition, other organizations—such as the Department of Natural Resources and the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation—help develop MUTs, and the National Park Service often provides assistance for the planning of MUTs. MPOs and RPAs often take the lead in planning multi-city trail systems. Iowa DOT's role in the planning and development of MUTs is generally limited to high-level planning efforts (such as this Plan) and providing dedicated state and federal funding for their construction.