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Rage on the bikeway

The Boston Globe

Walkers and cyclists clash on Minuteman path



Walkers and cyclists jockeyed for space on the tree-lined Minuteman Bikeway at the Arlington/Lexington line last week. (Globe Staff Photo / Wendy Maeda)

By Matt Viser, Globe Staff | July 1, 2007

LEXINGTON-- Frank Corsino walks nimbly, a cane in his left hand, a transistor radio in his right. He wears a driving cap and a wide grin, and for years along the peaceful, tree-lined Minuteman Bikeway, the 84-year-old man found solace after his wife and former walking partner died.

But these days it is a different story. Instead of the spirit-restoring stroll he used to enjoy, he finds himself going into combat mode, dodging torrents of joggers, cyclists, stroller-pushers, dog-walkers, and roller bladers who have flocked to the 11-mile trail in mind-boggling numbers.

Community leaders who oversee the trail say its popularity is higher now than in any of the 14 years it's been open, and the Washington-based Rails-to-Trails Conservancy estimates that there are 2 million

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annual users, making it the second-busiest trail of its kind in the country.

But as thousands each day compete for space on the trail's 12-foot-wide strip of asphalt, passing through meadows, suburban town centers, and manicured backyards, confrontations have become increasingly common. Police have been called out so often to resolve angry, and sometimes bizarre, disputes that they have coined a new term.

"We have road rage," said Arlington Police Chief Fred Ryan. "And now we have bikeway rage."

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In a 3-mile stretch in Arlington, police have filed 18 reports over the past year -- more than the previous two years combined -- that have ranged from bike-on-bike accidents to a woman who received unwanted sexual advances one afternoon while pushing her baby daughter in a stroller. Some men have been spotted running naked, others urinating in the bushes.

In one instance several years ago, a bicyclist kicked a Jack Russell terrier and yelled at the dog's owner, "Get the [expletive] over to the right!" as he passed by. Police tracked down the bicyclist and, after he apologized to the dog owner, did not press charges.

"It's a good thing that it's used so much," said David Watson, executive director of the Massachusetts Bicycle Coalition. "But in some ways I guess you can call it a victim of its own success."

The Minuteman Bikeway -- running from the western edge of Cambridge and through Arlington, Lexington, and Bedford -- was completed in 1993 as part of a rails-to-trails movement that has been converting inactive railroad corridors into leafy recreational paths. There are 28 such trails in Massachusetts, but people flock to the Minuteman because it is one of the few in the Boston area.

There are cyclists in full-body spandex suits, aerodynamic helmets, and titanium bikes that go fast enough to leave roadkill in their wake. There are roller bladers, swaying back and forth to music playing on headphones. There are dog-walkers, stroller-pushers, and frequent choruses of "On your left!" screamed by cyclists as they whiz by pedestrians.

There's a woman who walks a pet llama on a leash. A man used to ride his bike with a live parrot on his

shoulder. Snapping turtles have been known to slow traffic to a standstill.

On weekdays, some subway commuters take the trail to Alewife Station in Cambridge. Pedestrians can be seen reading books as they walk, and a few cyclists chat on cellphones, one hand on the phone and another gripping the handlebars. On weekends, recreational users and families pour in from the suburbs, packing the parking lots near the path.

"My favorite part," said 6-year-old Jessica Poulin last week, "is stopping for ice cream."

Others were less sunny.

"The roller bladers are too wide," said Rachel Shanley, a biker, referring to the weaving stride of inline skaters. "They take up the whole path."

Similarly, inline skaters complain: "The bikers have this supremacy about them," said Peter Roy as he slid on a pair of roller blades. "They're pushing 30-35 miles per hour. They hit us, we're toast."

Other popular rail trails, such as the Washington and Old Dominion Trail in Virginia, have posted speed limits of 15 miles per hour and several dozen volunteers along the trail hand out warnings to speedsters. Newer trails are often wider than the Minuteman, and have separate lanes for walkers and joggers.

Construction to revamp the 22-mile Cape Cod Rail Trail was completed last month, adding amenities and traffic-easing measures including a bicycle round about, seating area, and information kiosks where several trails converge. That trail is now cited as a model trail in Massachusetts, though it has fewer users.

The Minuteman trail, which sits on a former MBTA railbed and roughly follows part of the route where Paul Revere rode in 1775 to alert the countryside of the imminent British invasion, is maintained by volunteer committees in each of the four communities the trail passes through. Police departments respond to reports along the path by sending armed officers out on mountain bikes.

The committees say they don't have the money to widen the path, create new traffic lanes, or monitor the speed and behavior of the people who use it. Plans are afoot to repave the Lexington section of the path, and officials are considering posting more signs to encourage users to slow down and be more courteous of others. About two years ago, blue and white signs went up saying, "Keep Right, Share the Path," though some of those were stolen, and others tagged with graffiti.

The committees also have stuck to a philosophy of ensuring the Minuteman is accessible to all; they'd rather it be crowded than exclusionary, officials say. They have only one hard-and-fast rule, that there can be no

motorized vehicles, unless it's a wheelchair.

"Basically, stay to the right and be happy," said Jack Johnson, chairman of the Arlington Bicycle Advisory Committee. "If you don't like it, go find another path. It wasn't designed for one person or one type of person. It was designed as a multi use system."

Though there are no plans for widening or other improvements to the trail, local officials are hoping to make the Minuteman longer. Lexington residents recently approved funding for a \$125,000 master plan to create a 2-mile connector between the Minuteman Bikeway and the Battle Road Trail. Local officials also hope to one day connect the Minuteman to other paths, such as the Central Mass. Rail Trail and the trails along the Charles and Mystic rivers.

Corsino has been trimming the weeds outside his house, which abuts the trail, to encourage people to walk on the grass, out of the way of fast-moving bikers and roller bladers. He said he's seen so many spills that he carries a fistful of bandages in his pocket for first aid.

He has had his share of encounters, too. He recalls one day when a troop of Boy Scouts on bicycles came barreling by and he was hit by one.

"I went flying," he said. "The boy who hit me fell off the bike, his helmet went flying. He was just spread-eagle out there."

Matt Viser can be reached at maviser@globe.com ■

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