Portland’s recognition for its well-developed bikeway network and active bicycling culture has a long history. Long before automobiles became the dominant form of transportation in the U.S., there was much enthusiasm and activity around bicycling in Portland. Over the years, changes in policy, the built environment and the cultural acceptance of alternative modes of travel catapulted bicycling as a pillar of Portland’s identity.

Like many other places in the country, bicycle use in Portland dropped off during the middle of the 20th century. But Oregon’s interest in city planning and the environment in the 1970s laid the groundwork for a bicycling renaissance. Shortly after the passage of state land use laws that encouraged urban forms conducive to bicycling, Portland drafted its first Bicycle Master Plan in 1973. The plan’s effect was hampered by a number of obstacles, but soon the creation of the citizen Bicycle Advisory Committee and the Portland Office of Transportation’s Bicycle Program put the city back on track.

Throughout the 1980s, the Bicycle Program produced route maps, installed bike racks, wrote bike parking codes and began organizing bicycle encouragement events and programs. Later, the program changed focus to developing bikeway corridors, installing the first improvements on streets, which we recognize today as bicycle boulevards such as Clinton and Ankeny.

As bicycle ridership rose in the 1980s, attention turned toward developing more dedicated bicycle facilities and linking gaps in the bikeway network, especially in the city center. More public support, concerted advocacy efforts, and strong political leadership enabled the city’s bicycle program to undertake more aggressive projects. They began striping more bike lanes on major streets and installing more traffic calming facilities on neighborhood bikeways. Cooperation with TriMet integrated bicycle use with buses and the MAX, and essential bridge projects on the Hawthorne and Broadway Bridges improved access across the river. The city’s seminal 1996 Bicycle Master Plan, developed over two years with public input, provided the blueprint for the bicycle system in place today.

Since 2000, bicycle boulevard projects and off-street trails like the Springwater Corridor and Eastbank Esplanade have provided comfortable bicycle facilities that appeal to bicyclists of all skill levels. Other facilities that have increased cyclist’s safety and comfort include sharrows, HAWK signals, bike boulevard markings, and bicycle wayfinding signs. As a result, ridership has grown dramatically, especially among women and families.

With more infrastructure in place, bicycling has become increasingly more attractive, resulting in some of the highest levels of bicycle commuting in the nation. According to the 2008 American Community Survey, Portland observed a 6.4 percent bicycle commuter mode share—higher than any of the 30 largest cities in the nation.
More recently Portland began looking at international best practices to Portland has continued to invest in innovative bicycle infrastructure. Portland installed some of the city’s most pioneering facilities in 2009—setting the pace nationally for bicycle demonstration projects and experimental design. Bike boxes allow cyclists to comfortably cut to the front of traffic queue and safely traverse critical intersections.

Two recent examples of experimental pavement marking and roadway design are the PSU Cycle Track Demonstration Project on SW Broadway Avenue and buffered bike lanes on SW Oak and SW Stark.

To maintain Portland’s status as a world-class bicycling city, the Bicycle Program staff is finalizing the city’s Bicycle Master Plan update. Entitled the Portland Bicycle Plan for 2030, this plan provides a vision for Portland’s bikeway network in 20 year’s time. It also presents a comprehensive approach to achieve the city’s goals for healthy communities and vibrant neighborhoods, where 25 percent of all daily trips are made by bicycle. During the planning process, some the key goals identified that will advance this vision include:

- Strengthening policies in support of bicycling
- Expanding the network of planned bikeways from 650 to 926 miles
- Developing new designs for safe, comfortable attractive bikeways that can carry more bicyclists
- Providing more and better bicycle parking
- Strengthening and expanding educational and encouragement programs like Safer Routes to Schools, SmartTrips and Sunday Parkways
- Continuing to better integrate enforcement into transportation to reinforce safer roadway conditions for all users
- Monitoring and evaluating bicycle facilities and programs

During the bike master plan process, there has been increased interest in innovative design solutions such as bicycle boulevards, advisory bike lanes, contraflow bike lanes, and car-free streets. The city is already planning 15 new miles of bicycle boulevards. Also, since bike parking around the city is at capacity, the city is installing on-street bike corrals in high traffic areas to increase parking options and to keep the pedestrian right-of-way clear. These parking facilities have been so successful that businesses around the city are demanding their installation at their storefront. In addition, because Portland’s bridges serve as critical connections to various destinations for cyclists, the city is planning various bicycle and pedestrian enhancements on the Morrison Bridge and the future Willamette River Bridge to better accommodate bicycles.

With such an aggressive and proactive approach to installation, it is only a matter of time before new designs are implemented to provide safer cycling conditions. Portland’s continued commitment towards creating a world-class bicycling city will ensure that Portland, Oregon continues to hold the distinction of being a League of American Bicyclists Platinum Bicycle Friendly Community for many years to come.

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