

Acadiana cyclists get free helmets and information about road safety at Lafayette's Park San Souci

BY KAILEY BROUSSARD | SPECIAL TO THE ADVOCATE
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A bike safety event Saturday at Lafayette's Parc Sans Souci gave Acadiana cyclists an opportunity to register their bikes with the city, learn road safety and get free, fitted helmets.

Blake David, a partner at Broussard and David law firm, said the festival was organized to reduce preventable bike-related accidents and to inform the public about the rules of the road. He and his firm enlisted the help of city-parish government and BikeLafayette, a nonprofit organization focused on bicycle education.

David said the increase in popularity of cycling to work in lieu of driving comes from a desire by many in the younger generation to leave their cars at home.

"Lafayette's added a whole lot of bike lanes in the last several years," David said. "It's a generational thing. Millennials are telling everyone, 'We want to ride our bikes to work; we want to live in an urban environment. We don't want to have to drive everywhere.'"

Lafayette's bicycle movement, in particular, has been fueled by advocates for the city's downtown area and comes in the wake of Mickey Schunick's abduction and killing as she was riding her bike in 2012.

As a memorial, the Lafayette City-Parish Council voted to create an 8-mile loop through St. Landry Street, St. Mary Boulevard and Johnston Street — streets through which Schunick often trekked. According to city-parish Public Works Director Kevin Blanchard, the loop may be the first of several interconnected routes through the city.

In addition to new paths, other cycling-related attractions include the University of Louisiana at Lafayette's Geaux Vélo, a pay-per-hour bike-share program, and bike lanes now in places such as West Bayou Parkway and St. Mary Boulevard.

But with rapid expansion, David said, comes an "awareness gap." He said the most common cause of accidents is bicyclists going the wrong way in bicycle lanes and roads — particularly on Johnston Street. Cyclists going against traffic present a problem to motorists in turning lanes who may not see them.

"You want to keep a better lookout, but it makes it very difficult for people exiting private drives to look to the right. If they're making a right turn, they look to the left typically," he said.

David said cyclists' knowledge of road etiquette is just as critical as motorists recognizing that cyclists belong on the road.

Another aspect of bicycle safety is maintenance and upkeep. Festivalgoers had their bikes inspected and sent to Hub City Cycles' tent for minor repairs or, in some cases, were encouraged to leave their bikes at the business after the festival.

Bicycle issues pertinent in Lafayette echo those around the U.S., according to April Courville, a BikeLafayette board member. To combat injuries and accidents, Courville said, a united movement for awareness is necessary from both the community and the state.

She said motorists need to be aware of cyclists sharing the road and cyclists need to follow the rules of the road as well. "It also involves the government and infrastructure to accommodate these cyclist," Courville said.

Asked about plans for bicycle safety seminars, David said ideas for festival attractions are being proposed. However, he said all bicycle festivals will be, first and foremost, safety-oriented. "Some people want to do a ride or a race and a ride, so that might be part of it in the future, but right now, we're going to concentrate on safety and let the rest grow organically," he said.