Building Community Around Biking in Fairbanks, Alaska

When people think of Fairbanks, Alaska, they tend to picture snow, darkness, and inhospitably cold temperatures. Those things are certainly part of life in Interior Alaska, but those aren't the only reasons people don't bike there more often. In fact, quite a few Fairbanks residents already bike year-round. According to the most recent American Community Survey (ACS), 2.7% of Fairbanks commuters bike to work, more than five times the national average of 0.5%. Students at the University of Alaska Fairbanks are often spotted using the campus's bike rental program to get around. International workers arriving through the J-1 visa program to support the local



tourism economy regularly rely on bikes provided through local partnerships. More and more families are choosing to explore Fairbanks's connected bikeways, and the area's Metropolitan Planning Organization, Fairbanks Area Surface Transportation (FAST) Planning, recently distributed more than 600 high-visibility safety vests to local children.

Olivia Lunsford, a transportation planner at FAST Planning, has experienced how much biking can offer firsthand. "So many people don't even realize how convenient and fun biking is," said Lunsford. "I've used our active transportation network for years, mostly on rollerblades. In 2019, I got my first bike, a hot pink Cannondale, and realized this is a way more fun way to get around Fairbanks."

After realizing the joys of biking herself, Lunsford hoped to make the option more readily available through her work at FAST Planning.

"We have so many dark winter days, and bikes are excellent for mental health," Lunsford explained. Fairbanks residents could benefit deeply from being able to bike more places, more often.

Despite her best efforts (and a dedicated core of passionate local bike commuters), it's been challenging for Lunsford to get the wider community on board with biking. Many residents worry about traffic safety.

That's the challenge Lunsford brought when she applied to join the League's Active Mobility Leadership Lab.

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Active Mobility Leadership Lab

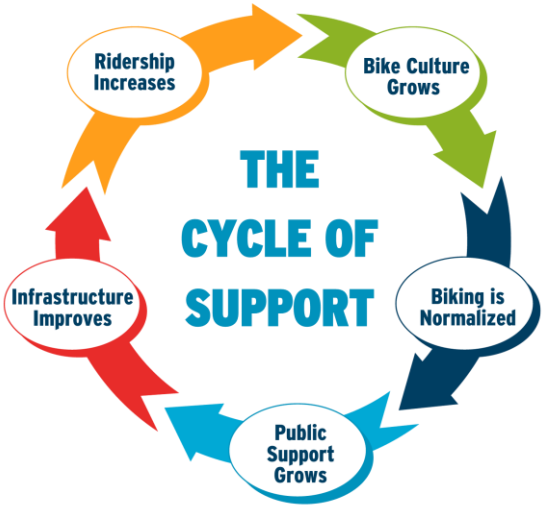
The Active Mobility Leadership Lab is a 16-week training program, generously funded by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in support of their Active People, Healthy Nation℠ Initiative. Participants (local government agency staff in emerging and aspiring Bicycle Friendly Communities) form a working group, develop an Active Mobility Action Plan, and receive training, resources, and direct technical assistance from the League to implement it.

Throughout the Leadership Lab, League staff guided Lunsford and participants from four other communities through training sessions, peer learning opportunities, one-on-one coaching, and the development of community action plans. A key part of the program asks participants to assemble a local working group, helping to build local collaboration, accountability, and community buy-in for projects that can help increase walking and biking.

For Lunsford, that local working group became the most valuable part of the experience.

"I often feel very isolated in my work," she said. "There are a lot of people heavily reliant on what I do [as a transportation planner], and yet the work is not super participatory. The Leadership Lab has been a really nice way to reorient with people who are willing to participate."

As the local working group began discussing Fairbanks' needs, one idea quickly gained traction: Bike Month. National Bike Month, held each May, gives communities a framework to bring the community together to celebrate and encourage biking, and to help build bike culture.



For Lunsford and her local working group, normalizing biking and building public support through initiatives like Bike Month is an important step toward longer-term change in Fairbanks. By helping more residents experience the benefits of biking firsthand, the

group hopes to build support for the programs, policies, and infrastructure improvements that make it easier and safer for people to bike as part of daily life.

The Bicycle Friendly Community's 'Cycle of Support' graphic illustrates how many communities have seen programming efforts like Bike Month lead to increased demand for bicycle infrastructure, which in turn creates a positive feedback loop by further increasing ridership and bike culture.

Beyond shaping the Bike Month action plan, Lunsford says the Leadership Lab changed how she approaches community engagement and coalition-building. "It has helped me figure out best outreach practices and standards, made me ask how I can find new ways to strategize, and inspired new creative tactics," she said. "I made a 'gravel for breakfast' video as part of an effort to win a street sweeper, and that creative energy came from the Leadership Lab for sure."

Perhaps most importantly, the Leadership Lab helped turn what felt like a personal ambition into a shared community effort. "It went from me asking myself, 'Am I the only one who wants to do Bike to Work Week?' to having a whole group of people stoked for an entire Bike Month," says Lunsford.

The first Fairbanks Bike Month is still taking shape, planned for May 2027. But for Lunsford, that's already a sign of success. What started as one planner's idea has grown into a community effort, with partners across Fairbanks helping build a stronger culture around biking and creating more opportunities for people to experience the city by bike. By bringing more people into the conversation today, Fairbanks is laying the groundwork for the community support needed to make biking and walking a more visible and accessible part of everyday life.

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