D.C. Marks Record Year For Bike Lanes As Riders Call For More Protection

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D.C. now has 69 miles worth of bike lanes across the city.

District transportation officials marked a record year for bike lane construction at a ribbon cutting ceremony on Wednesday at the 4th Street Northwest-Southwest bicycle route along Independence Avenue.

Nine miles of bike lanes were built in 2014, bringing the District's total to 69 in all eight wards. Under the MoveDC plan, 15 more miles will be built in the next two years.

This year bike lanes opened along M Street Northwest, 1st Street Northeast, 6th Street Northeast, Malcolm X Avenue Southeast, and Martin Luther King Jr. Ave. Southeast, among others.

As the popularity of bicycling increases in a city where more than 4 percent of commuters get to work by bike, the District Department of Transportation is looking to expand its bike lane network.

"We are not just looking in the District, we are looking regionally," said Matt Brown, DDOT's director, who sliced a red ribbon with a giant scissor at the corner of 4th and Independence.

"Right now we are constructing the Anacostia Riverwalk Trail Kenilworth Segment, which is going to connect D.C. to Maryland. That's a project that was funded by the Federal Highway Administration," Brown said.

Only six of the 69 miles are protected bike lanes, often called cycletracks, where riders are shielded from traffic by curbs or plastic flex posts. While such lanes take up more road space and are costlier than standard white stripes painted on asphalt, bicyclists prefer them because they are safer.

The District's heaviest bike traffic happens along protected routes. On Tuesday, despite the cold and rain, 1,350 bicycle trips were counted on the two-way 15th Street Northwest bike lane in downtown D.C., according to DDOT.

Both officials and advocates agree that increasing the number of protected bike lane miles should be a priority, starting with retrofitting existing facilities.

"It's absolutely possible to go back and retrofit some of the existing, standard bike lanes," said Greg Billing at the Washington Area Bicyclist Association, who conceded there is difficulty in approving projects that could take away space from vehicular traffic.

"That involves DDOT doing the community outreach and planning efforts, and bringing everyone to the table to be involved in that process," Billing said. "A lot of the bike lanes that were built early on were in places with excess capacity on the street and adding a bike lane didn't really impact traffic or parking. Some of the new ones are going to be more challenging."

Sam Zimbabwe, a top DDOT planner, said retrofitting existing lanes makes sense.

"The protected bike lanes make a big difference," Zimbabwe said. "I think we are looking for more of these opportunities. It's not necessarily about new bike lanes, it's about going back to some of the places where we have existing bike lanes and trying to make them more protected."

"I definitely prefer the protected bike lane but I will take what I can get," said Todd Curtis, who pedaled by the ribbon cutting ceremony on a Capital Bikeshare two-wheeler.

Curtis lives in Maryland, takes Metrorail into Washington, then often hops on a bikeshare to complete his commute. Not an avid cyclist, Curtis said the growing visibility of bike lanes is enticing him to incorporate bicycling more often in his commuting.

"I definitely feel a lot more comfortable the more they put in, especially with this recent connection they just had on 4th Street. The bigger the network, the easier it is to get somewhere and not have to be in the regular lane with traffic," he said.