

# A Bicycle Route Network for America

*Not content playing second fiddle to Europe and Canada, the United States and Adventure Cycling move forward with the most expansive bicycle route system in the world.*

Story by Dan D'Ambrosio

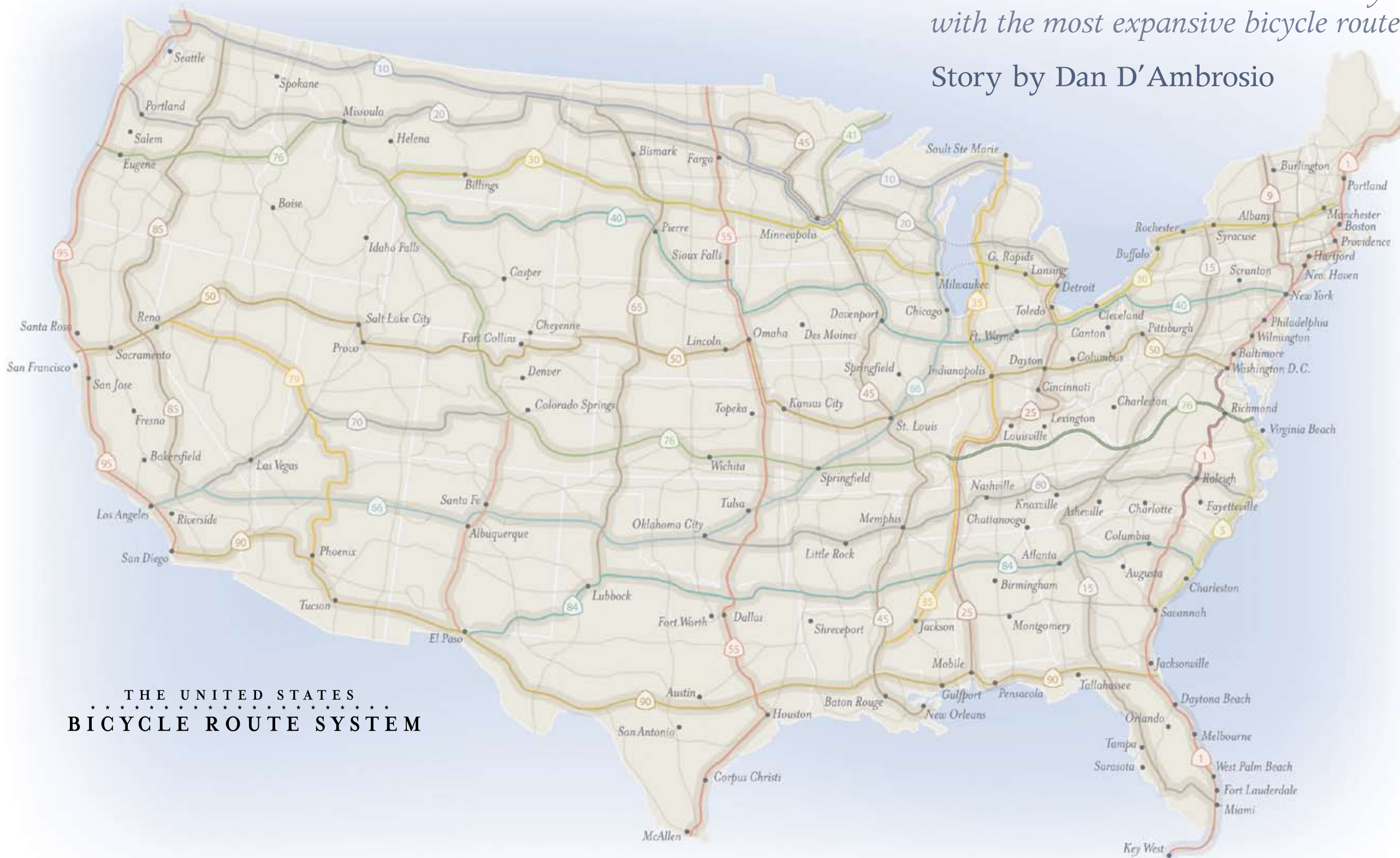
Back when I was working at the Adventure Cycling Association, we had three dreams. One, that the bicycle industry would *finally* pay attention to bicycle touring (now slowly happening). Two, that the TransAmerica Trail would get a spread in *National Geographic* (nope, although the *New York Times* recently ran a story on the Underground Railroad Bicycle Route). And three, that government officials, on the local, state, and federal levels, would take an interest in promoting bicycle travel, ideally by creating an official national network of bicycle routes that incorporated some or all of Adventure Cycling's vast web of routes.

Guess what? More than 20 years later Number Three is happening, thanks to the hard work of Adventure Cycling with plenty of help from some farsighted folks in the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), state transportation departments, and a cadre of dedicated volunteers.

The United States Bicycle Route System (USBRS), as the fruit of these labors is known, currently consists of a grid of north-south and east-west corridors where routes are proposed to be developed, covering the nation from Seattle to Miami and from San Diego to Portland, Maine. Adventure Cycling Executive Director Jim Sayer says it's a harbinger of great things to come.

"There's a renewed interest in cycling at all levels in the U.S. and the United States Bicycle Route System is a symbol of what could happen at the national level," said Sayer. "There are so many reasons why an official U.S. bike route system is important. It adds legitimacy and raises the visibility of cycling as a form of transportation. It connects cities with the countryside. It gives a coherent framework for investing in bicycling."

Beginning in the 1970s and stretching into



THE UNITED STATES  
BICYCLE ROUTE SYSTEM

the early 1980s two official U.S. bicycle routes, USBRS 1 through North Carolina and Virginia, and USBRS 76 through Virginia, Kentucky and Illinois, were designated, but then the entire effort fell off a cliff until it was picked up again some 20 years later by Adventure Cycling and other cycling organizations.

"People forgot about the system until 2003 when a number of organizations including the East Coast Greenway, the Mississippi River Trail, and Adventure Cycling approached the Federal Highway Administration about creating a national route system for bicycles," says Richard Moueur, an Arizona highway official who chairs AASHTO's Task Force on U.S. Bicycle Routes.

The USBRS got a tremendous boost last October when its system of 50-mile-wide corridors was officially sanctioned by AASHTO's Standing Committee on Highways, made up of chief engineers and directors of transportation departments in every state. (To see the USBRS corridor system, go to [www.adventurecycling.org/usbrs](http://www.adventurecycling.org/usbrs).)

"They looked at it and said 'Hey good plan, we're going to endorse it,'" said Moueur.

Together with the Federal Highway Administration, AASHTO oversees the nation's road system. Moueur works for the Arizona Department of Transportation as traffic design manager for the state's northern region.

"My team and I are responsible for all the signs, markings, signals and work zones in northern Arizona and all freeway operations," said Moueur. "My day job has nothing to do with bicycling, but since every roadway in my region is open to bicycle travel it has everything to do with bicycling."

Moueur has toured in the past and leads club rides on weekends, in addition to riding to work. He said the task force he chairs, which also includes Adventure Cycling Routes Coordinator Ginny Sullivan, began working on the corridor system in 2004 and went through 13 iterations before creating the version that went before the Standing Committee on Highways last fall. He credits Sullivan with providing much of the staff support required to bang the corridor system together.

But Sullivan says she stepped into a work in progress when she joined Adventure

Cycling in 2005, and adds that she in turn has relied heavily on Kerry Irons, an Adventure Cycling volunteer from Michigan for help in developing the corridor system. Irons gives the organization up to 20 hours weekly of his time.

"Kerry was hugely instrumental in pulling together information that became the first step in determining what national routes, state routes, and long trails already existed," said Sullivan.

From there, former Adventure Cycling cartographer Tom Robertson (who has since left the organization to pursue a career in photography) took Irons' research and turned it into a map showing the routes and trails he had found. Irons, Sullivan, and Robertson then collaborated on a report that was presented to the AASHTO Task Force chaired by Moueur.

"It went all over," says Sullivan.

Like Adventure Cycling's own route system, the USBRS will use existing roads and trails that are particularly well suited to bicycle travel, but there is one important difference in the criteria used for the two route systems.

"Adventure Cycling routes bypass major metropolitan areas," says Moueur. "The United States Bicycle Route System is intended to go into major metropolitan areas. We want people to be able to jump on a bike at their front door and go across the United States if they want to."

In developing the corridors, the task force also took into account destinations and regions with "high tourism potential," and "services and amenities" such as restaurants, accommodations, camping, bicycle shops and convenience/grocery stores at "appropriate intervals." Again, it's not unlike Adventure Cycling's network, and Sullivan says most of the organization's routes were incorporated into the corridor plan (though it will be up to the states to designate them).

Take the Northern Tier Route, for example. If the bicycle/pedestrian coordinator for the Department of Transportation in Wisconsin says shifting the existing Adventure Cycling route slightly this way or that way will make it much more likely to be accepted as part of the USBRS by local officials, then that likely will be done. (Especially since Wisconsin has one of the most active and effective bicycle/pedestrian coordinators in the country in Tom Huber.)

Sullivan said when she, Robertson, and Irons were working on their inventory of existing routes and trails they realized the situation on the ground was dynamic, with roads getting added or taken away all the time, so the corridor system for the USBRS has to be dynamic as well.

"The corridor plan can be changed at any time, especially within a state," says Sullivan.

One of the criteria for inclusion in the USBRS is that a route must go through at least two states, a requirement that will make it mandatory for state departments of transportation and bicycle/pedestrian coordinators to talk to one another — something that has not always happened up until now.

"Nobody was leading the effort to establish an official interstate system of inter-city bicycle routes," says Sullivan. "We weren't leading the effort and it fell off of everyone's radar."

That's why, when Robertson put together his map for the inventory of existing routes and trails across the nation, the lines didn't match up at state borders. Routes dead-ended. That's about to stop under the marching orders given last fall by AASHTO when it signed off on the map of corridors for bicycle routes across the nation.

"The corridor plan gives an opportunity for states to start talking to each other," says Sullivan.

Meanwhile big things are happening in Congress, thanks to the leadership of U.S. Representative Jim Oberstar, D-Minnesota, chairman of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, and U.S. Representative Peter DeFazio, D-Oregon, a senior member of the Transportation Committee, where he serves as chairman of the Highways and Transit Subcommittee.

"Oberstar and DeFazio have shown significant interest in the United States Bicycle Route System and its success," says Moueur.

Sayer explained that the transportation bill currently before Congress includes official recognition of the U.S. Bicycle Route System and contemplates creating "a pot of money to provide incentives for states to implement bike routes." The money would be available for planning, mapping, signing routes, and even construction.

"If (a state was) adding a shoulder or building a multi-modal trail they would need matching funds," said Sayer. "The

federal government likely won't pay 100 percent, but they would pay a sizable chunk. It would be very attractive to state and local jurisdictions."

As of press time, Sayer said Oberstar had not put a dollar amount on the funds that could be available to states for the USBRS through the transportation bill.

Another slight concern raised by some agency officials is which agency (or agencies) will be responsible for administering the USBRS program.

"We want to make sure we don't lose any momentum," said Moueur. "As a good government bureaucrat I try to look at every aspect of a bill. We're going to have conference calls with AASHTO and Adventure Cycling to figure out which way we're going (on the issue of how USBRS should be administered)."

Karen Votava, co-founder and recently retired executive director of East Coast Greenway, an 18-year-long effort to string together off-road trails and pathways from Maine to Key West, has been involved with the USBRS from the get-go.

"We've been very interested in this because we feel it's a way to give credibility

to our project," says Votava.

The Greenway is 23 percent complete and another 20 percent is in the planning, design and construction phase, according to Votava. A determined cyclist who is willing to deal with heavy traffic in stretches can ride the entire 3,000-mile route already. In fact, the first bicycling group did so in 2004.

"Our job now is to move more of the route off-road, creating long, safe sections so families could go with young children," says Votava. "We do plan to submit pieces of our route that are ready to be designated [as part of the USBRS]. We're hoping there will also be an on-road route that parallels our off-road route. I think that will happen."

The East Coast Greenway will be entirely signed, meaning you could ride it without maps if you chose to, which is the way Votava wants it.

"Adventure Cycling routes are not signed so people are forced to rely on maps," she says. "The maps are very good but it would be nice to relax and use signs as opposed to having your nose always in a map."

But it's not at all clear at this point

that the USBRS will entirely be signed. Sullivan said that under the existing application process, routes for the system can be mapped or signed, but not necessarily both, "because signage creates the complication of maintenance agreements." Everyone wanted to give states as much flexibility as possible to participate in the route system. Eight states — Florida, Georgia, Maine, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan — are already actively identifying routes for inclusion in the USBRS.

Sayer sees a bright future for the budding national system.

"What could be cooler than a child who gets on his or her bike and pops on a bike trail or bike route that goes to school and also has signage that could take them thousands of miles away later on when they grow up?" he says. "The U.S. Bicycle Route System will help them dream and think of the grand bike ride beyond. **AC**"

*Dan D'Ambrosio is a reporter for the Hartford Courant and the former editor of Adventure Cyclist.*



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