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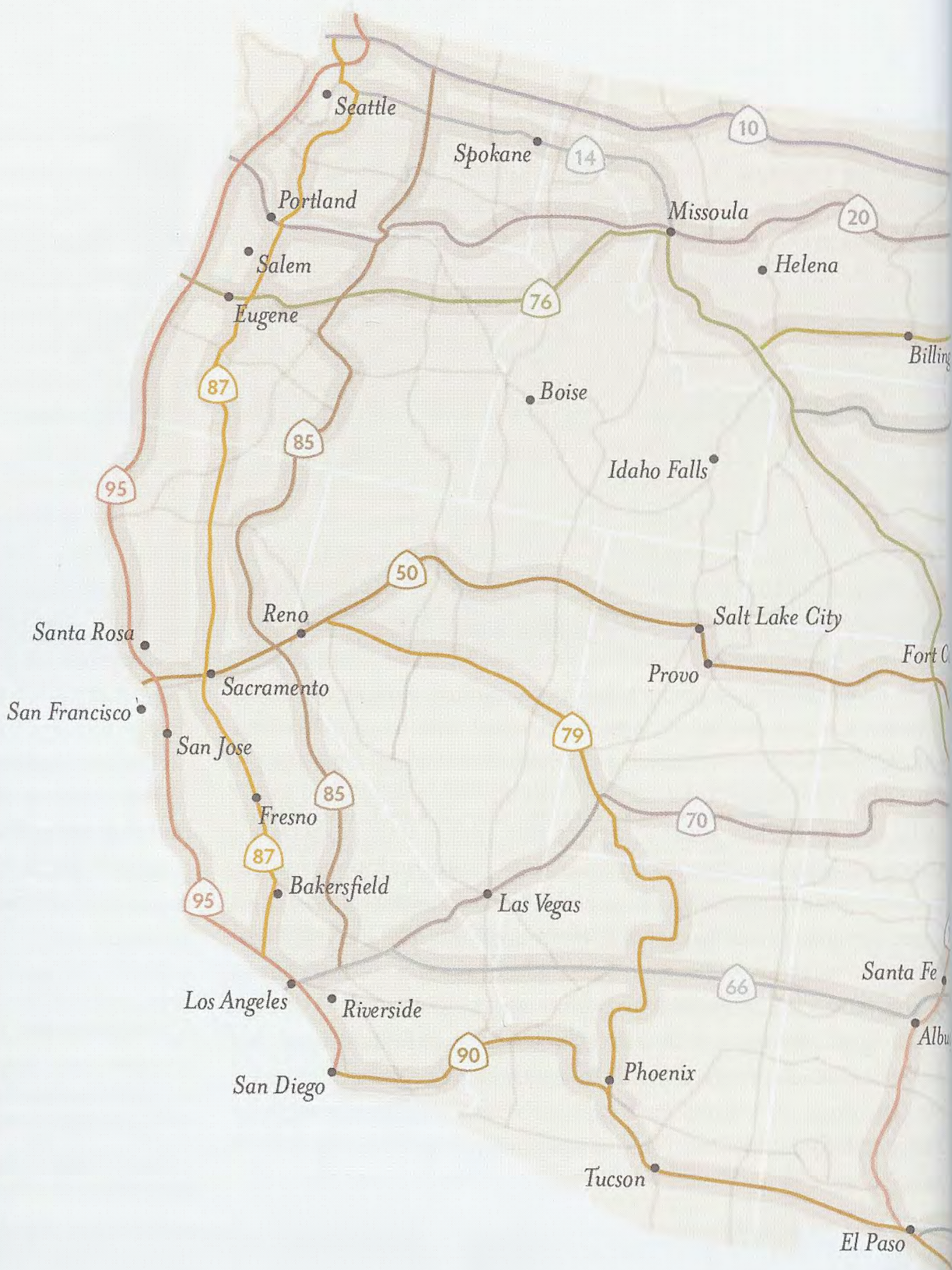
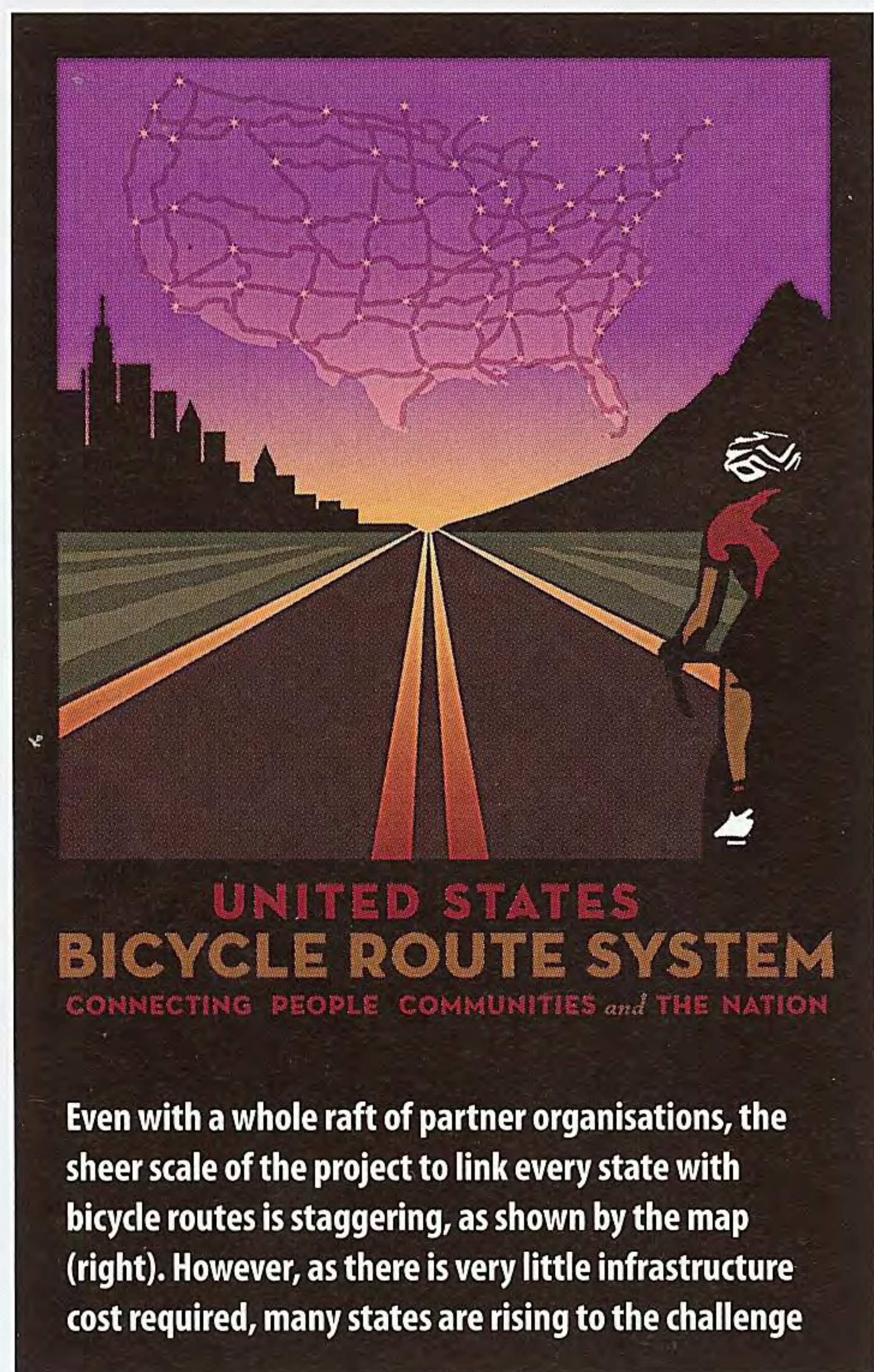
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Yours sincerely,
Ross Ringham
Editor in Chief





Uniting the states

A look at the US Bicycle Route System

Eager to leave behind its image as an oil-guzzling leviathan, the US is forging ahead with ambitious plans for a national network of cycle routes. Jerry Soverinsky investigates the progress made so far

While working as a cycling tour guide in Europe for nearly 20 years from 1985, I would return to Chicago each autumn discouraged that, despite living in a country that prided itself on its innovation, our bike route system lagged far behind those in Europe. It seemed that nearly every European country was opening new routes and improving old ones; this appealed to citizens who already cycled, while motivating others to ride to be green, get fit or save money.

In the US, there was no cycling network within states, let alone one between states. Those passionate cyclists interested in long-distance travel had to make sense of a patchwork of self-contained

urban and regional loops. The biggest issue for the US, however, is its size: putting in a cycling route from Portland to New York City — the distance from Copenhagen to Lisbon — requires the coordination of thousands of cities, municipalities, counties and states over roads that in many cases were never built to accommodate two-wheeled traffic.

The scale of the US is daunting. I cycled across the country a few years ago, and travelling through just one state — Montana — took the best part of a week, even with a stiff tailwind. In that time, a cyclist in Europe could travel across Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, with a day-trip into Germany for a lunch of Muller-milch and bratwurst.



- [———] PRIORITIZED CORRIDOR
- [———] ALTERNATE CORRIDOR
- [.....] PRIVATE OR PUBLIC FERRY
- [———] UNITED STATES BICYCLE ROUTE

Pictures: Adventure Cycling Association

But the situation in the US is changing dramatically. Without much of a fanfare, the Adventure Cycling Association (ACA), the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), state departments of transportation (DOTs) and a growing network of volunteers, have been developing a national bike plan: the US Bicycle Routes System. Ambitious isn't a big enough word to describe the 50,000 miles (80,500km) of cycle routes being planned. In less than a decade, they have achieved extraordinary results, creating a network that is being implemented quickly and efficiently, and at modest cost.

Founded in 1973, the non-profit ACA (formerly Bikecentennial) made headlines in 1976 as it coordinated a coast-to-coast bicy-

cle trip for a group of more than 4,000 cyclists, marking the country's 200 years of independence. These cyclists followed mostly lightly-trafficked roads while avoiding congested urban centres, and the route they took became known as the TransAmerica Trail.

Following the Bikecentennial success, many states became interested in interstate bike travel. In 1982, AASHTO put forward the idea for the bicycle route system; its mission was to "facilitate travel between the states over routes which have been identified as being more suitable than others for cycling".

Two inaugural routes were defined later that year: US Bicycle Route 1 connects Virginia and North Carolina; and Route 76 connects Virginia, Kentucky and Illinois, and borrows from the



Picture: Top, Fotolia; Ollivalli; Bottom, Kathy Verstuyts

TransAmerica Trail. At last, state and local governments seemed to be engaging in the cycling movement.

But then the project screeched to a stop, and no further progress was made for two decades.

The sudden reversal was due to several factors. Firstly, while Virginia had taken up route development enthusiastically, its neighbours hadn't; while AASHTO backed the route system, its involvement at that point was not the coordinated, national effort that was needed. Secondly, without strong national support, bike routes fell out of favour with transport agencies, which faced liability concerns and issues over resources. Thirdly, bike travel peaked in the 1970s and 1980s because of the fuel crisis. Consumers saw bicycles as an option, but as oil supply stabilised in the 1990s, that demand diminished rapidly. Call it the perfect storm of interference, but just as quickly as route development began, it retreated quietly to the sidelines...until 2002.

ACA, which had matured into a cyclists' organisation with 45,000 members, began pestering AASHTO to resurrect the bicycle route system. Following nearly a year of lobbying, AASHTO agreed to establish a task force to look at expanding the system. Included in this task force were officials from state and federal agencies together with cycling organisations, including ACA.

Using its skill at route development, ACA created the national corridor plan, a constantly evolving blueprint to help plan and implement the bicycle route system. The plan identifies a preferred corridor for travel — each corridor is roughly 50 miles (80km) wide — leaving individual states to decide which roads to use for the final route.

AASHTO's directors approved ACA's plan in 2008, and work began on the ground. ACA supervises the entire effort, supporting AASHTO and coordinating fundraising from member donations. But at the heart of the system are state and local interests.

When built, the bicycle route system will be a network of at least 29 routes, each of which will be given a number by state transport officials. The project requires an incredible amount of assistance from each state as well as coordination with neighbouring states. "While 80% of the routes are along county roads, not state roads, the state is the entity that applies for

number designation," says Winona Bateman of ACA. "So the state needs to secure local agreements from those local road authorities providing their support."

From there, bicycle and trail organisations provide guidance. Where available and practical, community bicycle plans are incorporated. Final development includes signage, markings and public map hosts. With Michigan in the final stages of route implementation (USBR 20), its work provides a template for other states' route development. "While Michigan DOT is the lead organisation within the state, volunteers figure out the routes, working with local trail authorities. They keep officials in the loop," says Virginia Sullivan, special projects director at ACA and one of the lead staff on the bicycle route system.

Two volunteers scouted the draft route, using feedback from local communities to tweak the final plan. Michigan is in the last stage of its review, after which it will send its assessment to AASHTO for national route designation. In order to receive such status, the route must link to an existing route (Route 20 links to Ontario's trail system, which qualifies for interstate designation).

The cost of the network is modest compared with most transport projects. For instance, Michigan's Route 20, which drew on the help of volunteers, cost less than \$20,000 (€14,500) in staff time. To sign the route (not required by AASHTO) might cost as much as \$40,000 (€29,000), but the final tally will depend on the nature of the route (number of turns, etc). The signs could be bought, installed and maintained by local road agencies or through a private organisation — meaning no expenditure by the DOT. "The bottom line," Sullivan says, "is this 320-mile route will cost the DOT roughly \$20,000, which is staff time only. The only hard costs will come if it chooses to print a map and sign the system."

As for the preferred roads, nearly all routes will use existing infrastructure, though where gaps exist (for example, where cyclists can't use bridges), states seek funding through traditional sources. "Eighty per cent of the system will be along existing roads and routes, so there's not a lot to construct," Bateman says. "The brunt of the exercise lies in the manpower to work with the local communities. We're looking at using existing road systems. When that's not feasible, we find an alternative."



Estimated costs for USBR 20

Project Management	Agencies	Hours on Task	Total	Potential Cost	In Kind	Actual Cost
DOT Coordination		300	\$ 13,500			\$ 13,500
Mapping/GIS		80	\$ 3,600			\$ 3,600
Volunteer or Contractor Coordination	29	10	\$ 290		\$ 14,500	
Draft Rte Volunteer		10	\$ 500		\$ 500	
Field Review		40	\$ 2,800			\$ 2,800
Project Hard Costs	Miles	cost per mile				
Signs	206	\$ 200	\$ 41,200	\$ 41,200		
Infrastructure						
Website Design				\$ 5,000		
Printing Map/Brochure				\$ 20,000		
Grand Total				\$ 66,200	\$ 15,000	\$ 19,900

\$1,000 = €728 (January 27, 2011) Source: Adventure Cycling. These figures are estimates and for illustrative purposes only

The figures above are based on numbers supplied by the Michigan department of transport. Note that the greatest capital cost is signage rather than infrastructure

Such alternatives can pose challenges, because construction will mean competing for funding against other public projects. “For example, we want to develop Route One between Florida and Georgia,” Bateman says. “But as the route stays close to the coast, there are no options for cyclists to cross St Mary’s river. None of the bridges there will accommodate cyclists safely.”

As a result, ACA is applying for funding, choosing which bridge can be modified for cyclists while at the same time developing an interim solution. “It will take about 10 years to get it done,” Sullivan adds. “So, in the meantime, we’re going to develop an inland route that falls outside the corridor.”

When pressed for the total cost of the project, Sullivan says that the topic is best explored on a state-by-state basis. “Each route will have to develop its own budget,” she says. “It will be an effort between private interests, local road authorities and communities, and the state DOT. For instance in Kentucky the state is paying for signage but it is relying on locals to maintain them.”

Those locals are invariably volunteers who sign up to the bicycle route system out of a passion for cycling. “We find the volunteers and trail advocates, many from established bike organisations, who will work with the DOT to offset the workload,” Bateman says. “We help train the volunteers so that they understand the process and have the tools in place.”

Scott Anderson is one such volunteer. He is giving his time to develop Route 20 in Michigan. “I’ve been impressed with other countries that have made strides towards providing facilities for long-distance cycling,” he says. “My long-term hopes are that much of the system comes to fruition fairly quickly and that this provides the impetus for long-term improvements to our secondary road network.”

Currently, 29 states and the district of Columbia are participating in

the project (up from just 22 states last autumn). While only two routes are complete (USBR 1 and 76, totaling 2,400 miles, or 3,861km) Michigan’s USBR 20 is scheduled for completion later this year, and New York is ready to implement USBR 30 with signage. Many others are engaged in route development.

Individual states have become more enthusiastic as the project has evolved, with most beginning to realise how a bike route can boost tourism. Indeed, many communities supporting the bicycle route system cite the tourism benefits.

Sullivan says completing the proposed network will probably take decades. “It’s a long process, much like the interstate highway system.” Perhaps that is underestimating the increasing momentum. At last year’s National Bike Summit in Washington, US transport secretary Ray LaHood made a surprise visit to the closing reception, voicing the government’s staunch support of cycling interests. “People across America who value bicycling should have a voice when it comes to transportation planning,” he said. “This is the end of favouring motorised transportation at the expense of non-motorised.”

A few months later, he wrote forcefully on his department’s blog: “The US Bicycle Route System is not just a bunch of bike paths; we’re talking about a transportation system. It will facilitate travel between communities and to historic and cultural landmarks. It will give people living in more rural areas a way to travel into a nearby urban area by bicycle. Urban and suburban residents will have better access to rural recreation areas. Like our interstate highway system, it will facilitate long-distance travel by bicycle, whether across one’s state or across the country.”

The bike route system is a plan that is unfolding efficiently and effectively. It has a long way to go to match the breadth of Europe’s bike system. But give us a few years. We’re rising to the challenge. ■



Each route develops its own budget with a mix of sources including private, local road authority, state DOT and federal grant funding