

The Fight for Walkability in Richmond, Virginia

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by

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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## **The Fight for Walkability in Richmond, Virginia**

### **Introduction**

In Richmond, Virginia, car-oriented environments and infrastructure often deter walking and biking. Walkable communities are associated with health benefits, reduced carbon emissions, and increased sociability. Bikeable places are much like walkable places. Cyclists thrive in human-scale, pedestrian-oriented environments. Unlike drivers, they can easily interact with each other and with pedestrians. To improve walkability and bikeability, cities must improve infrastructure and services – for example ADA sidewalks and access to bikes. Such improvements community-government collaboration. In Richmond, Virginia, advocacies, city government agencies, local businesses, university programs, and grassroots organizations collaborate to fight for better walkability and bikeability.

### **Literature Review**

According to Adhikari et al. (2021), walkable living is associated with lower rates of hypertension relative to car-centric living. This is likely due to the convenience of exercise through walking as opposed to sedentary time in a vehicle.

Walters and Ewing (2009) found that urban density and walkability can reduce vehicle miles traveled by 13 to 61 percent. Density and consequent proximity make walking and cycling practical mobility modes. As vehicle miles traveled falls, environmental burdens, traffic hazards and congestion fall too.

A sense of walkability in neighborhoods, the feeling of urban streets with pedestrians, bikes, and other modes of transport can contribute to a sense of community in those neighborhoods. According to van den Berg et al. (2022), “perceived walkability” improves

“neighborhood-based social interaction.” This further establishes that walkable living space is essential to quality of life.

One related published study explored the efficacy of pedestrian safety political advocacy for communities in the U.K. that were unsafe for pedestrians relative to other communities. The advocacy included informational mail sent to politicians that included pedestrian safety statistics from their constituency. Lyons, et al. (2013), found that targeting local politicians was “effective in increasing their interest... in advocating for improved safety measures,” but was not effective at implementing safety features at the time scale of the study, 25-30 months. This study suggests that formal advocacy in this style for pedestrian safety may be effective at the timescale of years.

Suen (2018) analyzes the impacts of compact and mixed development on land values in Richmond, VA. They found that accessibility to jobs and stores increases land values more than development patterns, compact development and mixed land use affect land values according to the “nature of existing land uses and land values,” and access to public transportation can improve land values, but not consistently in Richmond.

## **Promoters of Walkability**

### *Advocacy Groups*

For advocacy groups, an example is Bike Walk RVA: "Bike Walk RVA is a program of Sports Backers that advocates for comfortable and connected places to bike and walk for people of all ages and abilities" (Sports Backers, 2023). An example of this group’s work is distributing surveys for community engagement in bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure projects. Bike Walk RVA also trains “Champions” who professionally advocate for bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure projects. The advocacy group also organizes bicycle and pedestrian oriented events

such as Bike Restaurant Week, when a guided bike ride of customers takes place between restaurants of one side of town each day of the week (Sports Backers, 2018). Bike Restaurant Week is a great entry for beginners interested in cycling for transportation because they can ride in safe, guided groups that are visible to cars. Beginners can try out the bike route to their favorite restaurant, meaning they may feel capable of making similar rides in the future. Bike Walk RVA is an organized advocacy group that is important for improving walkability and bikeability through advocacy work and community events in the greater Richmond area.

### *City government*

For city government, a prime example is Richmond, Virginia. A representative primary source is a capital improvement project showcased on their website: "The City of Richmond is currently designing a shared-use trail along Gillies Creek" (City of Richmond, 2020). This trail will connect the Virginia Capital Trail that runs between the neighborhood of Shockoe Bottom and Williamsburg, VA to Armstrong High School on the north side of the city. The Gillies Creek shared-use trail is a premium addition to Richmond's bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure network and showcases the city's power and will to improve walkability and bikeability.

Another example of Richmond's city government promoting walkability is the Shockoe Valley Streets Improvement Project. This project will upgrade Oliver Hill Way for pedestrian and bike access with a cycle track, street lighting, and trees as well as encourage mixed use development and improve transit access (Shockoe Valley Streets, 2023). This Shockoe Valley project creates new space for pedestrians out of an undermaintained and underutilized stretch between downtown and Shockoe Bottom and is another way the city promotes walkability. Its proximity to the job centers downtown, the urban commercial district Shockoe Bottom, the train

station, bus rapid transit, and affordable housing means this project has great potential to be reborn into a vibrant, well-connected urban neighborhood.

Richmond recently passed a resolution to remove most mandatory parking requirements for new developments (Khalil, 2023). While the city passed this resolution to allow for more affordable housing, the resultant increase in density of new development will create a more walkable Richmond with more pedestrian accessible amenities.

A bikeshare service, RVA Bike Share, is available within the city to give community members another option for micromobility. 22 stations and 220 bikes operate within the city (RVA Bike Share, 2024). The flexibility and low cost of entry mean the system is accessible to most people interested in biking. Interestingly, the most popular stations are Browns Island (a park downtown), Monroe Park, and Canal Walk (connected to Browns Island), all of which are parks with frequent events and scarce parking. This suggests that the service is a valuable alternative to cars when driving and parking is suboptimal and is a way the city promotes biking.

The city of Richmond wrote a comprehensive plan for improvement titled “Richmond 300” which it aims to complete by the city’s 300<sup>th</sup> year of existence in 2037. The plan outlines goals for new zoning, growth of certain nodes in the city, improving housing, creating parks, improving city facilities, and reconnecting the city for non-car transportation (City of Richmond, 2020).

Chapter 3 of Richmond 300 outlines goals for equitable transportation. This includes safety projects for dangerous streets, requiring developers to construct sidewalks and other streetscape elements as part of their projects, improving ADA-compliant pedestrian infrastructure, and even restricting cars on some streets (City of Richmond, 2020). These elements of the plan show the city’s initiative to improve the experience of pedestrians.

Also included in chapter 3 of the plan is an ambitious bike greenway plan for the city that includes multiple major north-south connections and east-west connections mainly along the river. One well-known greenway currently in development is the Fall Line Trail, which will stretch from Ashland in the north to Petersburg forty miles to the south. Generally, the trails connect parks, commercial districts, and other municipalities in the area. The new system will connect to the Virginia Capital Trail, which connects Richmond to Williamsburg and is a popular recreational cycling route. Figure 1 below shows the greenway plan. This level of investment in greenways shows the area’s will to improve bikeability and walkability.

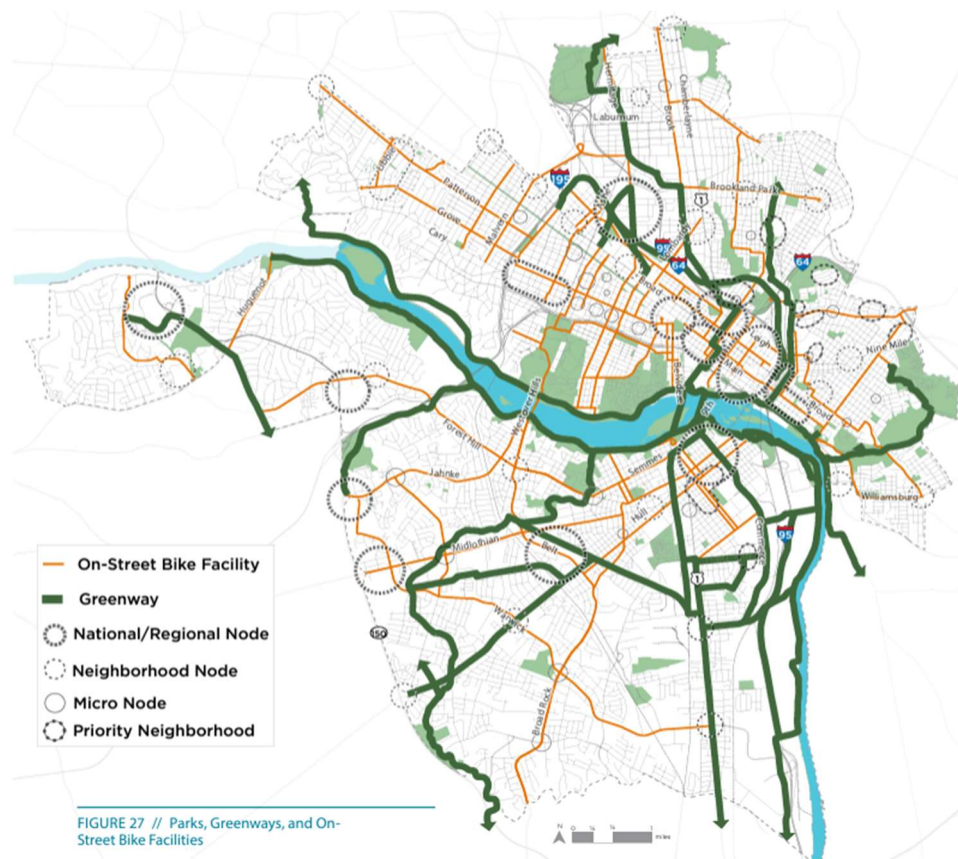


Figure 1: A map showing planned greenways for Richmond 300 (City of Richmond, 2020)

Complementing the transportation-specific chapter 3 of Richmond 300, chapter 2 covers “high quality places,” which calls for preserving and reinstating walkable characteristics of historic neighborhoods (City of Richmond, 2020). An example of this is prohibiting driveways

for newly built houses with alleyway access, which ensures that sidewalks remain a pedestrian-only zone. This section of the plan defines “Priority Growth Nodes,” which will receive special investment for growth over the next 20 years. Some examples of these nodes are downtown, which was partially gutted postwar for freeways and parking lots, Scott’s Addition, which is a post-industrial redevelopment, and Manchester, which is a hybrid of the two prior examples south of the river. Growth and regrowth in these areas is important for the city’s walkability and bikeability, as in addition to their walkable bones, they are all centrally located and adjacent to established walkable areas. An expansion of the city’s contiguous walkable urban space may be enough to convince more residents to walk or bike. To conclude, through Richmond 300, the city plans for progressive streetscape projects and regulations, growth initiatives, and regional greenway system plans that will improve walking and biking in the area in coming years.

Another government plan was created by PlanRVA, an organization founded by the Virginia General Assembly to plan for the nine localities that comprise the greater Richmond area. The plan, titled BikePedRVA 2045, recognizes newly recognized hazards such as a high proportion of trucks and SUVs on the streets and wide lanes in residential areas, and the plan describes goals to be implemented by 2045 (PlanRVA, 2023). Some of these goals include creating a regional active transportation network, constructing and improving sidewalk connections from transit stops to all neighborhoods, and improving active transportation connection through new bike boulevards and safe streets. While these goals are early in development, they function as updated guiding principles for current development and will promote walkability and bikeability for years to come. Much like Richmond 300, BikePedRVA 2045 is a progressive plan that will positively impact walking and biking in the area.

The inner neighborhoods of Richmond have been on an upward trajectory for walking and biking in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The new as of 2020 1<sup>st</sup> Street cycletrack safely transports micromobility users from Jackson Ward to downtown, and the Franklin Street cycletrack intersects it to take users west to VCU and the Fan or east to further downtown. Additionally, many intersections in the Fan and Museum District have traffic calming measures such as planter islands that function as mini roundabouts and extended curbs that reduce lane width at intersections. Both features slow cars while allowing micromobility users to pass with ease. Jackson Ward and Manchester have seen infill development projects in the past decade that redensify their communities post freeway installation and post industrialization, respectively. This density in central neighborhoods allows for a higher concentration of services accessible by walking. The combination of streetscape projects that deprioritize cars and allowing neighborhoods to densify over the 21<sup>st</sup> century show that Richmond can implement positive change for walking and biking. Recent history shows that the city's plans likely will be implemented.

### *Bike Shops*

For bike shops, an example is Carytown Bicycles in Richmond, VA. Bike shops act as spaces for discourse about active transportation: "Mitchell McKenna at Carytown Bicycle Company says more cyclists are being forced to share the roads, so he thinks the city needs more protected corridors" (Wyant, 2022). Bike shop workers converse with cyclists as well as pedestrian passersby in their shops, and they tend to be involved in bike groups outside of work. Bike shop workers' visibility and community involvement make them prime candidates for media interviews such as Wyant's, making them valuable proponents of bikeability.



Another example is Outpost Richmond, which is a full-service bike shop and bodega that services the neighborhoods on the west side south of the James River. In addition to neighborhood connectivity, the shop is adjacent to Forest Hills Park, home to some of the best bike trails in the city, so quick stops from cyclists for minor repairs or snacks are common for the shop. Outpost promotes bikeability both as a bike shop and as exposure to bikes to customers of their bodega (Outpost Richmond, 2024). These customers are met with friendly faces that love bikes and are introduced to community bike events through the shop.

### *University Programs*

A university program that promotes bikeability is RamBikes, a free bike shop for students funded by Virginia Commonwealth University. RamBikes performs tune ups, installs parts, gives advice, and even lends out bikes, all for free (VCU, 2023). One deal RamBikes offers is a free tuned up bike in exchange for twenty-five hours of volunteer service at approved organizations. One student, Krishna, in an interview by James Shea (2023) took the deal and even spent some of her twenty-five hours fixing the bike she would receive. She said she loved volunteering, and she is grateful she does not have to walk everywhere. This program promotes bikeability by providing a valuable practical service to the community. Their Instagram (@rambikesvcu, 2024) has 890 followers and has bike-related memes and advertisements for their services. Content creation is a good way to ensure students are aware of services and may even remind students to bike. Their presence can be the tipping point for some community members to bike instead of drive.

University of Richmond also has bike friendly programs for students (University of Richmond, 2024). The campus has a bikeshare service that is low tech and rooted in trust: anyone can take a bike and leave it at a rack anywhere else on campus. If a bike is broken,

simply call the maintenance tech to report the issue. A system this simple with no barrier to entry is perfect for introducing beginners to cycling and encouraging one-off bike trips for those who normally do not cycle. The university also has a bike rental service through their outdoor equipment rental program. Mountain bikes are available for the city's recreational trail systems and commuter bikes can be rented for trips away from campus. In addition to the ability to borrow bikes, students can bring their personal bikes to a self-repair station complete with bike tools. The services University of Richmond provides promote bikeability in their community.

### *Grassroots Groups and Community Events*

One local grassroots group is Richmond Cycling Corps (RCC), which gets K-12 students from the city's disadvantaged east end on bikes. The organization has a mountain bike team that races all around Virginia, and students meet with counselors for road bike rides that can reach up to 100 miles (Richmond Cycling Corps, 2018). Generally, kids that are interested in cycling come from affluent upbringings as bikes, parts, maintenance, and race fees can add up to thousands of dollars yearly. Richmond Cycling Corps lowers the barrier to entry for children from low-income families through free bike expertise, coaching, and counseling. One member student, Tawante Nash, in a video by Matt Crane (2016) claims, "you get more mature being in the program. Before I was cycling, I couldn't really do nothing. Like I would quit, all that. But cycling helped me not to quit, to keep pushing." Another member student, Jasmine Walker, in the same video says, "I was a bad student, but then Craig [an RCC coach], he started getting me on the right track, so now I'm a good student." These testimonials from high school students show how powerful RCC is for supporting young people and setting them on the path of cycling and promoting biking in the greater Richmond area.

Another community event that occurs in Richmond is Walk with a Doc, a worldwide organization that organizes meetups with a local healthcare provider and attendees walk with each other for an hour. The event meets biweekly in Richmond at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and brings locals together from the surrounding walkable neighborhoods to meet and walk together (Walk with a Doc, 2024). This group promotes walkability by reducing the barrier to entry to walking through the presence of a doctor and community. Attendees may be introduced to walking through this group, which generates interest in improved walking infrastructure.

Finally for grassroots groups is Broad Street Bullies, a critical mass bike ride in Richmond with hundreds of weekly participants. This ride routes through some of the most trafficked and urban streets in the most prominent neighborhoods downtown and west of downtown. The ride gives cyclists visibility, community, and a sense of safety on the streets. A founding member, Amon, says in an interview by Harris (2023) "...you can ride in the city safely because you're surrounded by other bikers." Another interviewee, Illya, agrees: "...it can be scary riding in Richmond, especially with all the people that drive aggressively. Cycling in a larger group gives people a feeling of comfort..." Because of the weekly ride, drivers can understand being deprioritized on the street as cyclists normally are. Cars must wait and make way for bikes, the opposite of the standard. The ride is slow and invites all types of cyclists from professionals on gravel bikes to wheelie kids on BMX bikes to families on Walmart bikes and everything in between. Broad Street Bullies is important because it promotes micromobility in a nontraditional way. Instead of showing up to town hall meetings or lazily posting on Instagram, these cyclists come together to show their support for cycling with their numbers. An interviewee and founding member, Salad, admits "...there are so many people outside of BSB that are focused on the bike lane part of biking. We can help, and we can repost stuff, but that is

not our specialty– politics.” BSB occupies a space in bike promotion that the government and other official organizations cannot: they unite people in a raw, organic, and fun way. Broad Street Bullies is an important part of bike culture in Richmond and an effective promoter of bikeability.

## **Conclusion**

Community activities like Broad Street Bullies and bike shop interactions are just as important to Richmond’s walkability promotion as organizations like advocacy groups, the city government, and university programs. Community activity gets people excited about walking and biking and offers fresh perspectives for attendees. Traditional advocacy for infrastructure can only be as effective as the community is willing to walk and bike. Strengthening the walking and biking communities in Richmond through something as small as a Facebook post or as large as the Broad Street Bullies bike rides increases the sociability of walkability and public awareness. This improves culture and empowers residents to get involved in advocacy and other groups. The combination of all walking and biking activity in Richmond offers a snapshot of the state of promoting walking and biking and shows the ways individuals get involved to promote walking and biking in their community.

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