



Trail Patrol: A Proactive Approach to Public Safety on Trails

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Three Rivers Park Police have played an active role in developing safety protocols relating to trail safety, including trail educational efforts and enforcement in the greater metro area. A number of staff have presented regionally on this issue and/or serve on committees at the state level to address trail safety. Lisa Austin, MNDOT Bicycle and Pedestrian Planner, requested that Three Rivers Public Safety submit this article to the Minnesota Police Chiefs magazine outlining some of the innovative things we have done to improve trail safety.

According to the League of American Bicyclists, Minnesota consistently ranks in the top five for bicycle-friendly states. This is primarily due to the state's huge network of trail systems and bike lanes coupled with efforts to reduce riding congestion through innovative trail designs and safe riding opportunities. However, as more commuters choose to bike to work, road congestion as well as bicyclist vs. motorist conflicts will continue to rise.

In 2009, the 100-plus miles of regional trails patrolled by Three Rivers Park District received an estimated 2.2 million visits. Regional trails in the St. Louis Park and Hopkins area accounted for 727,000 visits and the Dakota Rail Regional Trail, which traverses picturesque communities along the shores of Lake Minnetonka, experienced over 250,000 visits. These numbers do not include visits on trails that connect to the Three Rivers Regional Trail network, such as the popular Midtown Greenway in Minneapolis. Cyclists accounted for 79 percent of all trail users in Three Rivers Parks. Metro trails have indeed become as busy as many roads, with the added challenge of competing trail uses, such as bicyclists vs. in-line skaters vs. walkers vs. speed bikers vs. family bikers, etc. Safe use of the trails requires an appropriate response by law enforcement.

In the past, law enforcement for bicycle violations on roads or trails was a low priority for many police agencies, as more serious crimes and calls for service pushed bike enforcement and education down the response hierarchy. Crime on trails has been historically low and petty in nature, so there was little need for a concentrated trail presence. However, recent accidents on or adjacent to trails and/or related to trail crossings in the metro area clearly indicated that a proactive effort to address trail safety was needed. This effort must focus on trail awareness and education as well as enforcement of violations.

A specialized and proactive "Trail Patrol" unit was established to deal with all trail-related issues and enforcement. Two sworn police officers and three non-sworn park service officers were assigned full time to trails. Daily duties include issuing citations to cyclists for running stop signs, documenting graffiti and responding to medicals. Officers mostly patrol by bicycle, but also utilize electric vehicles and occasionally ATVs, with a high emphasis on visibility.

Officer presence has by far produced the largest benefit in reducing issues on the trails. After partnering* with agencies like Hopkins and St. Louis Park Police Departments (who established Graffiti Net, an innovative and comprehensive system for tracking graffiti vandals), graffiti incidents on the trail system dropped 70 percent. While patrolling, officers immediately document graffiti when it is found. It is then temporarily covered with primer paint until proper cleanup is completed. This sends the message to vandals that graffiti will not be visible for long (usually less than 24 hours) and that the behavior will not be tolerated.



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The presence of officers on the trail system has also held more serious crime to a minimum while creating opportunities for great positive contact with citizens. The author has commented that in his 14 years of prior law enforcement experience, he has never received as many compliments for doing his job as he has received while doing trail patrol.

Officers also attend several cyclist-related special events each year in order to make positive contacts with cyclists and to educate them about Minnesota bike laws.

In 2008, Minnesota recorded 13 bicycle fatalities — the deadliest year to date. Three Rivers Park District itself experienced a death on its trail system in 2009 and a number of bicycle accidents as well. Additionally, one cyclist was struck by a car and killed at a trail crossing when he disregarded a stop sign at a busy intersection, and a jogger was struck and seriously injured under similar circumstances.

As is the case for many vehicle accidents, bicycle-related accidents in the Park District were largely attributable to rider error or disregard of the safe rules of the road. Last year, Three Rivers Public Safety officers issued 85 citations and more than 100 written warnings to cyclists for various offenses, mostly for running stop signs at trail crossings. According to MNDOT's Share the Road Campaign, 50 percent of bicycle crashes occur when cyclists and motorists are on perpendicular paths.

The purpose of the Share the Road Campaign is to increase public awareness among both bicyclists and motorists of the circumstances and locations where crashes are most likely to occur. Materials to support the campaign include pocket cards with eight tips to sharing the road. Three Rivers Police Officers distribute the cards to cyclists on the trail to help with their education efforts. Materials are available to order on the www.sharetheroadmn.org website. Several other law enforcement agencies across the state also use the materials for bicycle safety education.

Although many cyclists obey all rules of the road, some cyclists choose to ignore traffic laws because they don't believe the rules apply to them or it is an inconvenience to literally come to a complete stop, unclip from their pedals, etc. This is why police enforcement of cycling laws is important; it legitimizes cycling as part of the "mode" of transportation in our state. It is a right to ride a bicycle on a street or road, but a privilege to drive a motorized vehicle (issued in the form of a driver's license). Police departments play a huge role in the changing landscape of our roads, with the goal of ensuring public safety.

*Three Rivers Park District has partnered with a number of law enforcement agencies, primarily in Hennepin County, to improve trail safety. A number of staff members serve on regional and state-wide committees, working to address the many inconsistencies in signage and policies relating to safe use of trails and roads by bicyclists.

Danny McCullough currently works for Three Rivers Park District as a police officer. He has been appointed to the Minnesota State Non-Motorized Transportation Committee under MNDOT and serves on numerous other trail and pedestrian committees. He is a certified International Police Mountain Bike Association (IPMBA) Instructor and is responsible for public safety issues on over 100 miles of regional trails. Danny began his work in law enforcement 13 years ago when he served as a senior park ranger for Tennessee State Parks for 10 years and was director of the Bicycle Ride Across Tennessee. He can be reached at dmccullough@threeriversparkdistrict.org.

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