

GR'S BICYCLING COMMUNITY

Whether they're commuting to work, competing in races, riding long-distances or biking for fun with family and friends, local cyclists can find support at every turn.

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George Raimer

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— George Raimer

George Raimer's journey from hip replacement surgery to logging more than 15,000 miles on his bicycle as a regular commuter shows the transformative power of pedaling.

He's also lost more than 50 pounds in the process and become an advocate for the health benefits of cycling. Raimer took up bicycling — on a Schwinn mountain bike someone gave him — as a form of mental and physical therapy after his hip surgery in January 2009.

"I started out just riding down to my parent's house about a mile away," he said. "I'd say it's part of a healthy lifestyle now. I feel so much

better. I would say, being in my mid-50s, I feel better than I did when I was in my early 40s."

Raimer recreationally rides the paved bike trails in eastern Kent and Ionia counties and occasionally enters races, but most of his miles have come from commuting. He rides two or three days a week — about 50 miles roundtrip — from his home east of Lowell to work on Monroe Avenue in Grand Rapids. The route takes him along M-21 and other busy streets, so he's grateful for shoulders and the city's new bike lanes.

"I prefer roads with bike lanes and use them whenever I get the chance," he said. "It's really great to see the transformation that Grand Rapids is making. I see a lot more people riding bikes and commuting than I did a few years ago."

PART OF DAILY LIFE

The city has an active bicycle community that stays connected through bicycle shops, races, group rides and other events. The Greater Grand Rapids Bicycle Coalition's work and the city's efforts to add bike lanes over the last five years have been a boon to all cyclists, said Tom Tilma, the coalition's executive director.

The city will have 70 miles of on-street bike lanes by this summer, with plans to reach 100 miles.

"Cycling has been hot in Grand Rapids

for a long time," he said. "Everything you could want is here. But we're a very auto-centric society. Walking, riding a bike or taking the bus has not been the first choice for many people to get around. Now we have helped fill that gap to make cycling part of daily life."

The cycling demographics are as diverse as the reasons people ride, from 20-year-old college students and bearded hipsters to competitive racers and the 75-year-old dressed in full spandex.

People take up biking for health, environmental and economic reasons as well as to challenge themselves and quell their competitive drive. But there's also a segment of recreational bicyclists who enjoy the beauty of vintage models, or who ride as a way to be social and see the city or scenic rail and river trails at a leisurely pace.

Research shows millennials and the creative class want to live in cities where they can walk or bike to work, the grocery store and other hot spots, Tilma said.

Tilma rides to work when he can and says he's noticed vehicles don't follow as close as they used to and give him more room when they pass. He's also a casual mountain biker and gravel road rider.

"I ride my bike because it's fun and I need the exercise," he said. "I really feel privileged in my daily work that I get to promote improvements that are making our city cooler and healthier and more sustainable. I see people now who are riding their bike slowly to the grocery store and take home three bags of groceries on their bikes."

Regular commuters such as Raimer worry about distracted drivers. He said it's important to wear bright reflective clothing when riding in the dark, and he always has lights on his bike and helmet so he's visible.

Bicycling has transformed Raimer's life in the last six years, and he touts the benefits for mind, body and spirit. He started to increase his distance by riding with coworkers and began commuting to and from work on his own. He also does moun-

tain and fatbike riding and endurance racing and completed a tour of the White Pine Trail two years ago.

"I'm always biking against myself," he said. "It's fun to see what the human body can do."

He owns five bikes now and commutes year-round, using carbide-studded tires in the winter. This past winter, he had a blast riding his fatbike with studded tires on the icy rail trails — where people can hardly walk.

"Both physically and emotionally, biking is great for you," he said. "I'd like to encourage everybody to get out and get fit; they'd be amazed at how good they feel. It's really life changing."

A TEST OF STAMINA

Endurance racer Danielle Musto prefers to test her skills and stamina on off-road terrain, once riding for 24 hours in rain during a race in British Columbia.

Musto started racing mountain bikes a decade ago and won the USAC 24-hour National Championship in the solo single-speed category in 2011. She placed fourth at the 24-hour solo World Championships in Scotland last October. That race involved 30,000 feet of climbing on mountain bike trails, riding over dirt, rocks and roots, and 24 hours of continuous racing with very few breaks.

"It's extremely technical," she said. "I love seeing how far I can push myself and I love riding throughout the day and as it slowly turns to dusk. It's a really fun atmosphere racing at night; everything kind of

changes. At the end of the night, there are times you want to quit, everything hurts. You have to push yourself as fast as you can go for as long as you can possibly go."

They're often hiding out on mountain bike trails, but Grand Rapids has another group of cyclists who enjoy the thrill of competition and testing their physical limits. Endurance mountain bikers, fatbike riders and cyclocross racers travel across the state, throughout the Midwest and even the nation to compete. Many train on mountain bike trails and gravel roads in the area.

"I love doing women's clinics, getting more women on bikes. It's good for everybody's health. It's really fun, makes them confident, feel independent."

— Jill Martindale

Jill Martindale, avid fatbike and endurance racer, practices at some of the local places open to the public: Luton Park, Merrell Trail, Cannonsburg State Game Area and Cannonsburg Ski Hill. During the winter months, many racers turn to fatbiking and ride the groomed Merrell Trail or rail trails.

Koetsier's Greenhouse hosts a Thursday Throwdown fatbike time trial in the winter. Fatbikes have wider tires for biking on snow or sand.

"During the winter, fatbikes are so much fun," Martindale said. "Fatbikes are definitely getting more and more popular."

Martindale works at Grand Rapids

Bicycle Co.'s Ada shop and started long-distance riding with her family. She took up mountain biking in 2011 and competitive racing in 2013, along with bike packing around Lake Michigan in 2011, Lake Superior in 2012 and Lake Ontario in 2013.

Martindale, 27, quickly took to the sport with the help of Musto, her coach, who has sponsors to help support her racing.

Musto's now husband introduced her to competitive cycling 10 years ago. He did cross country races and she would hand off water and cheer him on. After a ride around Reeds Lake, Musto was hooked and decided she wanted to be "awesome" at it. She began mountain biking and training for races.

"I started doing endurance racing — 100-mile races, 24-hour races — that's where I discovered where my strengths were," she said. "It didn't come easy at first. I have a coach down in North Carolina and a strength coach. There was a big learning curve, but I was super-determined."

Musto, 37, helps with social media for Grand Rapids Bicycle Co. and leads ladies' rides. She also will head a kids' mountain biking team for GRBC this spring.

The two women competed in the Great Lakes Fat Bike Series last winter, with Musto taking first and Martindale finishing second overall female. They also participated on a four-woman team this winter and traveled throughout the Midwest racing and teaching clinics.

"Danielle kind of took me under her wing," Martindale said. "She's been training me, taking me to races, helping me

Creating a cycling plan

West Michigan has had a strong contingent of fitness-focused cyclists, road and distance riders and competitive mountain bikers for years, but cycling for transportation and errands as a daily part of life is growing in Grand Rapids due to a dedicated effort of advocates and city officials to make the city more bicycle friendly.

Grand Rapids has gone from virtually none to 63 miles of bike lanes in the last five years. City officials plan to complete another seven miles by June and then embark on a more comprehensive cycling plan to add more buffered, or protected, bike lanes, said Chris Zull, the city's traffic safety manager.

"The biking community loves them, of course, and we are seeing more and more people biking," he said. "The numbers keep going up and up, which is great. Buses and bikes are interacting. All Silver Line buses

have bike racks on the front."

The new infrastructure is a great step in helping the city become a "cool city" and advance its designation by the American League of Bicyclists as a Bicycle Friendly Community from Bronze to Silver, said Tom Tilma, executive director of the Greater Grand Rapids Bicycle Coalition.

Nearly 40 million Americans bicycled in 2012 and bike commuting increased more than 61 percent from 2000 to 2012, according to the ALB.

There's growing proof that giving cyclists room on the road and connecting routes is a key component of a healthy, livable community. Several city departments, concerned cycling advocates and groups have collaborated in recent years to make bicycle lanes a reality, including the coalition.

"Our focus has been on cycling, not just

for recreation but also for transportation," Tilma said. "An on-street bicycle network was the missing piece."

Creating a culture that accommodates bicycles is also about economic development, quality of life and attracting millennials and the creative class, Tilma said.

It's also good for the environment, tourism, encouraging an active lifestyle and social equity for all residents. There's also the economics: Some people commute to save money or cannot afford a vehicle and rely on a bicycle for transportation.

The coalition's Room to Ride campaign wants to see 100 miles of bike lanes and more buffered lanes.

"We're hoping a new comprehensive cycling plan will lay out goals and standards that will improve the design and maintenance of that on-street network — that lanes are connected as much as possible,"

prepare for them. I love doing women's clinics, getting more women on bikes. It's good for everybody's health. It's really fun, makes them confident, feel independent. Kids get more confident in themselves and feel good about themselves."

Martindale has entered several other races and won or finished near the top. She placed fourth in the Lumberjack 100, which is part of the National Ultra Endurance series, and finished second in the 12 hours of Nite Nationals in Auburn, Ala., last year.

When she's not racing or recovering, Martindale commutes on her bike between downtown and Ada and out to some of the mountain bike trails. She said many racers spend their weekends traveling to various events.

"You'll see the same people showing up and you become friends with a lot of people," Martindale said. "There's a lot of heckling, a lot of camaraderie, a lot of competitive people out there racing."

Another popular racing circuit — cyclocross — takes place in the fall in city and county parks and other locations in West Michigan. Racers ride on grass, dirt and pavement with bikes that look like road bikes. Some people use mountain bikes. The courses include forced dismounts and man-made obstacles that racers must run over or up and over. The course is visible from one or two vantage points, making it a spectator-friendly event.

Event promoter Rick Plite formed Kiss-cross Events LLC about a decade ago to organize and promote the series. Some



Colorburst Bike Tour

races attract up to 200 participants and vocal hecklers and supporters.

He's also the promoter of the Lumberjack 100 mountain bike race in Manistee National Forest every June. The Founders Barry-Roubaix Killer Gravel Road Race in Hastings, the largest gravel road race in the world, is another popular event that kicks off the riding season every March.

"That's really exploding right now," he said. "We had 2,800 people in March last year. That's how many people want to ride gravel roads."

FOR THE FUN OF IT

On the other end of the spectrum, many people enjoy riding in groups for exercise, social interaction and a safer way to travel in the city.

There are a variety of cycling clubs, social rides and biking pub crawls in Greater Grand Rapids. Many are organized through local bike shops, but one of the less formal, less competitive clubs is the Grand Rapids Vintage Bicycle Club. The group attracts a lot of attention due to the bright, retro colors, shiny chrome embellishments,



Tilma said. "We also would like to identify the best locations for protected bike lanes."

The city's goal is to reach 100 miles, but the next phase will involve extensive planning and construction beyond signage and pavement markings, Zull said.

In 2010, the city started adding bicycle lanes on city streets where possible as part of its plan to create an urban bike network. It allotted money in the budget, but the lanes were added at a relatively nominal cost by restriping and installing signs during construction projects.

When complete, the network will provide linkages between roads, paved bike paths and greenways, mountain bike trails and regional trail networks.

"We're going to keep doing bike lanes going off the map we've already developed, but that map is going to mature into a plan," Zull said. "We identified many roads where

we could retro fit bike lanes into travel lanes without a lot of negative impact. One of the biggest (concerns) is parking. We didn't have to take out parking to put in the bike lanes, but most of those opportunities have been used up. This next phase is going to be more intentional."

The city also received a \$485,000 bicycle education grant in 2013 through the Michigan Department of Transportation to focus on safety and education and promote a "share the road" culture.

Planners and consultants continue to work on a comprehensive bicycle safety education campaign. Tilma serves on the committee and said the coalition has been hired to deliver some of the education programs.

The goal of the three-year grant is to provide education and training on the operation of a bicycle in traffic and to increase

the knowledge of the responsibilities of bicyclists and motorists. The first step was to analyze crash data reports to identify the demographics to target, Zull said.

There's a consensus that an education and safety campaign is an important next step in improving motorist-bicyclist interactions and advancing the city's cycling culture.

Regular road riders have said there seems to be a lack of knowledge on the part of drivers and riders regarding traffic laws and right-of-way.

"We think that, statistically, cycling is a very safe activity," Tilma said. "The more people who are out there riding, the safer it's going to be. We all want to reduce crashes and we encourage everyone to drive and cycle defensively."



Ted Oostendorp of the Grand Rapids Vintage Bicycle Club, one of several cycling clubs in Greater Grand Rapids, restores a headlight on a vintage Schwinn Cruiser.

funky accessories and handlebars, and craftsmanship of the bikes.

While the club formed around the love of vintage makes and models, founder Ted Oostendorp said it's as much about getting together to be social and nostalgic for a simpler time when bikes had one or two speeds and life wasn't so rushed.

"There is a segment of people who like the simplicity of the vintage bicycles," he said. "They're very comfortable, leisurely bicycles to take to the grocery store or ride to the park, and these bicycles are really quite beautiful."

Oostendorp's interest in vintage bikes started as a family hobby several years ago when his bicycle with gears was stolen. He found two old Schwinn bicycles in need of repair and restored them to ride around the neighborhood.

His two sons also took an interest in them, neighbors took notice, random people started asking about them, and his garage became a workshop. He put an ad on Craigslist to garner interest from others, and four guys showed up. From there, the club was born about five years ago.

Oostendorp's email list for the group includes about 60 people, but the Grand Rapids Vintage Bicycle Club Facebook page has more than 600 likes and attracts interest from collectors across the globe.

The club is more of an informal social group, open to anyone who wants to ride at a leisurely pace and show off their bike. Members gather monthly for a group ride,



which starts from a local establishment, spring through fall.

The group is made up of all kinds of people: college-age kids, families, collectors, serious riders and people who like working on the bikes. Several club members enjoy getting together to tinker, make repairs or give a neglected cruiser new life. A core group meets informally to plan events, swap parts, ride to a nearby pub, or sit and chat about ways to customize their bike.

"It's certainly a fun experience," Oostendorp said. "It's a very family-oriented activity. It's a very peaceful experience."

The best way to connect with the group is through the Facebook page. Outings typically draw between 10 and 40 riders,

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depending on the weather and time of year. There's a kickoff spring bridge ride and a fall ArtPrize ride.

For Raimer, joining the Rapid Wheelmen Bicycle Club has been a great way to meet fellow bicycle enthusiasts and learn about different types of bicycles, races and group rides, along with participating in free time trials every Monday night at Ada Park. The club, organized in 1970, aims to promote fun, safe cycling for all through rides, races, tours and advocacy.

"In a cycling club like that, you learn a lot of things about safety, how to set up your bike, be on a bike comfortably and not injure yourself," he said.

For those who don't like to mountain bike or road ride, there is a strong connection of mixed-use and rail trails throughout Grand Rapids and surrounding townships and counties where people can ride at a casual pace and take in the scenery.

Many trails, including Kent Trails, Reeds Lake Trail, Ada and Cascade Township trails, Fred Meijer River Valley Rail Trails and Riverside Park north to Rockford and the White Pine Trail, run along rivers and through parks, making them great for beginners, families and weekend outings.

Raimer learned about the area's rail-trail systems by talking to someone at a festival in Saranac, and now he's vice chair of Friends of Fred Meijer River Valley Rail Trails.

"I do really like the rail trails because you're away from traffic, it's good for families and groups, and you don't have to worry about the pollution from the cars or being hit by one," he said. "It is real scenic, especially the Grand River Valley Rail Trail. It runs through the Ionia Recreation Area and it's not uncommon to see deer or turkeys or other wildlife, even eagles along the Grand River."

A SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY

Raimer is a good example of someone who didn't know much about bicycling or the cycling community when he first got into it. He started asking questions, researching information on the Internet, talking to other riders and just getting out there.

"I really didn't know anything about ... riding more than a couple of miles at a time before I started riding with one of the guys at our shop up to Rockford and back," he said. "You can start without much knowledge and you don't need a really expensive bike. I started out on a bike that was given to me."

The Grand Rapids area has nearly 20 retail bike shops, which offer a wealth of information.

"Most all of the local bike shops are great about getting people set up on bikes to make sure they are in the best position," Raimer

said. "If you are comfortable on a bike, you can ride all day long."

Whether for pleasure or sport, cycling can be an expensive hobby. Not everyone can afford a high-end bicycle or pay for regular repairs, so two bike shops in the city — Boston Square Community Bikes and The Spoke Folks — operate with the mission to make cycling accessible and affordable to all.

The Spoke Folks, 221 Logan St. SW, opened shop in 2012 and became a non-profit in 2014. Bike tools and repairs can be expensive, so the organization offers a collaborative work space for people to come in,



Endurance racer Danielle Musto has been racing mountain bikes for more than a decade.

rent tools and work on their bicycles. It also holds classes on bike maintenance, how to ride legally on the road and other topics.

Both Boston Square Community Bikes and The Spoke Folks refurbish and sell used, quality bikes.

"We did 500 plus repairs last year and sold 120 bikes and had 52 new memberships," said Jay Niewiek, executive director of The Spoke Folks. "We help people get on bikes. Our mission is to make sure everyone in Grand Rapids has a safe and reliable bike and feels empowered. We are a shop for all cyclists, whether they race professionally across the state, use a bike as a means of transportation, or don't have a valid driver's license and have \$2 in their pocket."

Niewiek, 30, and his wife made the decision to sell one car and commute via bicycle as much as possible.

"We don't want to spend \$20,000 on a car or gas," Niewiek said. "We want to find other ways to slow down and enjoy life.

That's why that 20 to 30 age generation is asking, 'How bikeable is the city where I want to work and live?' ... They want walkable, bikeable communities."

Other organizations, such as the West Michigan Mountain Biking Alliance and West Michigan Trails and Greenways Coalition, offer resources on mountain biking and multi-use trails in the area. Many racers and hobbyists help maintain area trails as part of the West Michigan Mountain Biking Alliance.

"There's a lot of community involvement to maintain the trails," Musto said. "During storms, trees will go down, volunteers will rake the leaves and trim the brush," she said. "I actually think, through all of my travels, that West Michigan has this enormous, really welcoming cycling community. We have awesome trails for training, and I love that I can just ride out my front door and get to a single track."

Martindale agrees, saying it's easy for beginners to get started.

"It's easy to hop on a mountain bike and get out there on a trail," she said. "There's a lot of really nice people out there who will help you when you're out there riding."

The Greater Grand Rapids Bicycle Coalition, a nonprofit policy and advocacy organization, evolved after a bicycle summit in 2009 brought together more than 200 people who wanted to help Metro Grand Rapids create safe, convenient opportunities for bicycling.

The GGRBC organizes an Active Commute Week in May and two large fundraisers that have garnered interest from national partners: Climate Ride Midwest and New Belgium Brewing's Clips Beer & Film Tour.

The coalition also heads up the bicycle-traffic counting program based on a national model. Volunteers go to three locations in the city and collect usage data. The counts are conducted in September, in the same week, at the same times and same locations every year.

Some promising data from the counts: Bike traffic increased by 57 percent between 2011 and 2013; in the East Hills location, a cyclist passed by every minute during rush hour.

"The indications are cycling as part of daily life is growing," Tilma said. "On-street infrastructure benefits all cyclists — those riding for recreation and fitness and those biking for training. There's a feeling it's safer to ride on local streets."

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