



Las Cruces, New Mexico: A Bicycle-Friendly Trail to a Healthier Community

The population of Las Cruces, New Mexico is **93,000 and growing fast** — so fast that the latest 2010 Census data rank Las Cruces the fastest-growing city in New Mexico, and the 11th fastest-growing in the entire country.

Like other places experiencing rapid growth, more people in Las Cruces has meant more sprawl, more cars, more roads, and more traffic. Until recently, Las Cruces residents could have described their city as typical of car-centric, spread-out Western cities, short on safe options for healthier two-wheeled and two-legged modes of transportation.

Over the past few years, local cyclists have made significant progress in convincing motorists and truckers to share the road. This is due in large part to a new but strong partnership between state and local obesity prevention coalitions — Healthy Kids New Mexico and its local replica, Healthy Kids Las Cruces — and a Las Cruces transportation planning group, the Metropolitan Planning Organization. With an initial spark and ongoing support from the New Mexico Department of Health, these local organizations connected the dots across transportation, the built environment, and health. Among other accomplishments, the City of Las Cruces received a coveted Bicycle Friendly Community designation in May 2011 from the League of American Bicyclists, becoming only the second city in New Mexico to do so.

A School Connection Launches a Local Partnership

The state-level group, Healthy Kids New Mexico, began in 2007 with the usual players — the Departments of Health; Education; Aging and Long-term Care; and Children, Youth, and Families. As obesity prevention initiatives across the country broadened to include food and transportation policies, the New Mexico group followed suit, adding the Departments of Transportation and Agriculture.

Healthy Kids Las Cruces (HKLC) began as a Healthy Kids New Mexico pilot program in late 2007, housed in the Department of Health's regional office covering 10 counties in southwestern New Mexico. The pilot was designed to highlight how state and local partnerships could develop community-wide models to address obesity prevention in five key settings: the built environment, education, community, food systems, and health care. Through early and well-attended stakeholder planning meetings, HKLC zeroed in on making improvements to the built environment and accommodations for bicyclists and programs to support these changes, such as Safe Routes to School.

A natural partner for promoting bicycle-friendly policies in Las Cruces was the Metropolitan Planning Organization, or MPO. (All cities with populations over 50,000 have MPOs, which are federally funded and serve as local forums for transportation planning.) Representatives of the two organizations had initially crossed paths during a successful Safe Routes to School training in Las Cruces several years earlier.

As the health-centered HKLC group began adopting transportation goals into its planning, a parallel “cross-pollination” was happening on the transportation side, as health became

an anchor for the region's long-term transportation plans. In 2010, health and transportation agencies were both active co-sponsors of Las Cruces' annual Bike-to-Work Day for the first time. "Why didn't we think of this sooner?" wondered one of the organizers, commenting on how much sense this made. To the bicycle advocates' bicycle rodeos and repair workshops, the health department added heart-healthy screening and bicycle helmets.

A Concrete Goal: Becoming a Bicycle-Friendly Community

Official designation as a "bicycle-friendly community" by the League of American Bicyclists is no easy feat; many of the cities currently on the list (including Las Cruces) applied several times before succeeding. The designation requires cities to undertake specific improvements in the five "Es"—Engineering, Education, Encouragement, Enforcement, and Evaluation. As the sponsoring organization—the League of American Bicyclists—explains, "Bicyclists are an indicator of a healthy, vibrant community." Improved quality of life, they suggest, leads not only to better health but also to better economic indicators such as property values, business growth, and tourism.



The HKLC/MPO partnership and its focus on bicycle-friendly policies infused new energy into their efforts, and began collaborating with a local Bicycle Friendly Community Task Force. In addition to HKLC and MPO, the Task Force brings together cycling advocates, six city departments, and other health and transportation groups—each playing to their strengths in a common pursuit of making Las Cruces more bicycle friendly.

Following the lead of the national Bicycle Friendly Communities group, the Las Cruces Task Force partners organized themselves into three "E" committees: Education/Encouragement, Enforcement, and Engineering. Each has contributed to changing the local environment to make bicycling safer and more accessible for both recreation and transportation. For example, the Education/Encouragement group developed a logo and "Share the Road" brand to make the group's message more visible and to reach both cyclists and motorists with safety messages. They also succeeded in having the City Department of Parks and Recreation install bicycle racks in all city parks. The Enforcement group enlisted the help of several local police officers who patrol their beats by bicycle and is conducting a review of existing bicycling laws to determine where upgrades were needed. The Engineering group works with the city's Public Works Department to compare roadways scheduled for resurfacing with those deemed least suitable for bicyclists—to accomplish two improvements at once, adding bicycle lanes as each road is resurfaced.

In addition to finally achieving their official designation as a bicycle friendly community, the distance covered by bicycle lanes in Las Cruces jumped from 10 miles to 65. In 2009, a Complete Streets policy was passed, promoting safe use of local roads by drivers, pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit riders alike. According to results from the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, between 2000 and 2008, the number of commuters who travel to work by bicycle in Las Cruces increased 300%—from .5% of commuters to 1.45%. Riding bicycles to school is also more supported among the community through the promotion of "2-wheel Tuesdays" and "Walking Wednesdays."

These changes occurred in fits and starts over more than a decade, but were accelerated by the partnerships between health and transportation groups at both the state and local levels. Whether Las Cruces residents walk, drive, bicycle, or ride the bus, the Las Cruces partners' efforts to make their community more bicycle friendly have offered safer transportation options and more choices.

For more information, please contact:

Patty Morris

New Mexico Department of Health

Email: patty.morris@state.nm.us

Dawn Sanchez

New Mexico Department of Health

Email: dawn.sanchez@state.nm.us