



Establishing a Sustainable **BIKE GROUP**



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Suggestions for Establishing a Sustainable Bike Group

Safe and Active Genesee for Everyone (SAGE) is facilitated by the Crim Fitness Foundation as part of its active living program. SAGE is a multi-disciplinary partnership that supports and promotes opportunities for people to be physically active throughout Genesee County. As part of its mission, SAGE offers support to organizations that promote active transportation such as walking, bicycling, or using mass transit.

Friends of the Flint River Trail (FFRT) is collaborating with SAGE to provide information to people working to form new bicycling groups. For more than a decade, FFRT has offered a weekly ride program that is welcoming, safe, and comfortable for beginning and intermediate riders and for families. FFRT promotes bicycling to new riders and introduces riders to local and regional trails.

Although there are numerous ways to start and run a successful community bicycling program, what follows here are suggestions and ideas that have worked well for FFRT. Different towns and different sets of people might require a different approach, but we hope that this information will provide a starting place for some of you trying to get a group started as well as added tips for established groups.

Getting Organized

If you are just getting started, begin by clarifying your goals and identifying people to help you.

CLARIFYING GOALS: Think about what it is you are trying to accomplish. Here are some possibilities:

1. You like to ride regularly and close to home, you want a group of people to ride with you, and you like to encourage other people to enjoy cycling.
The primary focus of this document is how to establish and maintain this type of community cycling program.
2. You want to advocate for the creation and expansion of multi-use trails and routes in your community.

Since your best advocates are likely to be people who regularly ride bicycles, you may find it useful to begin with goal number one so that you can get cyclists who share your concerns together and talking. You may be more successful getting people together for a regular ride than you would be getting them together for a regular meeting – besides it's more fun. In addition, having a regular ride group demonstrates interest and commitment in your area.

Trail advocacy information is available from the [Michigan Trails and Greenway Alliance \(MTGA\)](#) and other websites listed at the end of this document.

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**Begin with the end
in mind.**



- 3. You want to help encourage active lifestyles in your community and create, improve, or expand the opportunities for being active. Your interest goes beyond bicycling and has a broader focus with respect to activity, age, and ability.

This broader goal is likely to require a larger group of community partners of which cyclists will be only one. In Michigan, we are fortunate to have the Michigan Fitness Foundation, which works on creating active communities; and locally, we have SAGE, which promotes active living in Genesee County. Health organizations also often focus on encouraging active lifestyles.

In the beginning, you may want a narrower focus until you get an established group and have some successes behind you. As you build interest and more people join you, you will be in a better position to tackle broader goals.

PEOPLE TO HELP: Once you have a clear idea of what you are trying to do, your next step will be to identify people who share your goals and are willing to help you. You may be lucky enough to live in a community that has a parks department with money and staff, but staffs change, budget woes are common, and interest and commitment from paid staff is likely to fluctuate depending on funding and the interest level of particular staff members. Therefore, to ensure progress and especially sustainability, organize a team of 8 to 10 committed people who share your goals and are willing to spend their own time to work on them. Partner and communicate with public officials and organizations and include them as much as possible; they can be essential allies in helping to make bicycling facilities safer and more convenient. However, it is important to keep your bike group strong and independent so you can continue to move forward even if the government/agency support system falls back.

For your core group or steering committee, your best team will have a variety of skill sets and contacts. Every person who shares your goals has something valuable to contribute; match the skills and interests of your team to the jobs that need to be done. Always ask people to do what they like to do. Remember that the people on your core team are volunteers; they need to be doing things they like with people they like, or they will not stick with you. Also, thank and praise all volunteers for everything they do and never take them for granted.

MONEY: Fortunately, you can get a good start without any money. Although you will need volunteer time, bicycle-riding programs are inexpensive to run since you use public facilities and most people have their own equipment. In addition, participants are usually willing to chip in for the few things you might need. Local businesses, service organizations, and recreation departments will often support minor printing and/or equipment costs. Hopefully, people in your core group will have personal connections to help get things done and/or leverage resources. If you have strong leadership and a committed core group, money should not hold you back.

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Before You Ride: Decisions to Make and Things to Do

Before you set up your first ride, there are some decisions and plans you can make so that your first ride successfully leads to more rides. Below are ideas that worked well for Friends of the Flint River Trail (FFRT). Every group will be different, but this list will at least give you some things to consider.

Consistency is important.

- **PICK A TIME AND PLACE:** Always start your rides at the same time and from the same place. Make sure that one of the leaders of your group is always there to greet people and that you ride “rain or shine.” Be consistent and dependable.

Consistency is important. It avoids confusion; people always know there is a ride, and they always know that someone will be there. They do not have to question, “Is this the right week, right time, or right place.” They do not have to call someone to ask if the ride is “on” even though it looks like rain, etc. This consistency will build ridership. People do not have to think too hard or make advanced plans or commitments; they can just show up and know there will be someone to ride with.

Being dependable means of course that your core group must be organized and committed to having someone from the group that will ride no matter how cold or wet it is, or what holiday it happens to be (People do ride on Mother’s Day and not everyone leaves town on holiday weekends). The only exception to the “ride rain or shine” rule would be lightening, which is clearly hazardous. Even then, at least one of your leaders should be at the starting point to greet anyone who might show up.

- **RIDE LENGTH:** How long your ride is will depend on routes that may be available to you and on what type of riders you want to serve. Beginning and intermediate riders will do well with rides of somewhere around 10 miles. That will be too short for some and too long for others; you need to work with the people who participate to find the right speed and distance. Just remember that to a beginning rider 10 miles is a very long ride. People who are just getting into riding often have terrible equipment and are often not accustomed to sitting on a bike seat. They need to have an enjoyable experience so they come back again. Experienced riders who want to ride longer and faster can make it difficult to continue to make your ride appropriate for beginners; you need to decide what you want your ride program to be.

FFRT has experimented with dividing people into groups for different speeds and distances. For the most part, that has not worked well. People often select the wrong group, more groups require more leaders, and dividing people up interferes with the overall group cohesiveness.



A better approach seems to be to keep the speed down and take breaks every 20 minutes or so. These things make it easier for beginners to ride more miles, everyone stays hydrated, and people get a chance to socialize which also helps to keep them coming back.

If you want to offer a longer ride option, you can start everyone out together, but at a certain point divide the group into people who would like to continue and those who would like to go back. Both groups will need a leader. Those who turn back need to feel part of a group not some sort of “failure” for turning around. Again, new or inexperienced riders will be discouraged by a ride that is too long or too fast for them. And if you want them to come back, they have to feel like they “belong” to the group not that the group is too “advanced” for them.

Regular rides for advanced cyclists also are successful and probably more common. For example in Genesee County, Genesee Wanderers has offered a popular ride program on the west side of the county for decades; CycleFit Sports Club offers a similar program in southern Genesee County. The Wanderers have a ride calendar that posts time, place, distance, and difficulty for each of their rides. Their “short” rides are 20+ miles and they ride much faster than the FFRT rides. Generally speaking, beginning cyclists require much more support and encouragement than the experienced ones. If you are interested in organizing rides for faster riders, you might check for information and contacts on the [Wanderers](#) website or look for similar organizations in your own area.

Many people who start riding with FFRT often build strength and experience and then ride with more advanced groups. And often, people who ride with the advanced groups bring family or friends for a more leisurely ride with FFRT. The ride programs complement one another.

- **RIDE ROUTES:** Select your routes to match the interest and abilities of your group. Obviously, your route will depend heavily on what is available in your area. Bike trails are safer than riding on the streets and roads – but unfortunately, they are not always available. If you can, stick to neighborhood streets where traffic volume is low. Avoid high traffic areas and major street crossings as much as you can; this is especially important if you have families with children riding with you.
- **DESTINATIONS:** It is always nice to plan your ride to a destination – a park, ice cream shop, etc. Your destination can be a place to rest, drink, and socialize before heading back. To add variety and interest to your regular ride, consider periodically adding a special destination. FFRT has included in their regular Sunday rides destinations to such places as art museums,

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**Keep the speed down
and take breaks.**

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**Avoid high traffic
areas.**



historical sites, nature areas, etc. Of course, ice cream shops are always a popular destination. If one of your goals is to encourage people to use their bikes for transportation, showing people good routes to get to places they might want go can be very helpful. Most people think of getting to destinations via the routes they use when they drive their car. They need help learning more bicycle-friendly and more pleasant routes.

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Riding as a group builds friendships.

- **“DROP” OR “NO-DROP”:** Decide what kind of ride you want to have. Some cycling groups offer rides that start together but the riders do not stay together on the ride; slower riders “drop” behind. FFRT has always run a “no-drop” ride, all cyclists stay together during the ride; no one is ever left behind. If someone cannot complete the ride, a member of the core group rides with them back to the starting point.

There are some serious problems with running a “no-drop” ride. Faster riders must ride slower and stop longer to allow the slower riders to catch up. For faster cyclists, that means they get fewer miles in for the time they spend on the ride. Sometimes you have really slow riders or young children who cannot keep up at even a slow pace and you will have to arrange an alternative route for them. One of your core group members will then need to accompany them to ensure that they have a safe return to your starting spot and an enjoyable ride. Riders should not be abandoned to fend for themselves.

Although it has its problems, there are significant advantages in the “no-drop” format. First, riding together builds group camaraderie – people get to know each other; it’s a social experience. And, it has been shown that people are more likely to ride, exercise, and stay involved with the group if there is a social component to the activity. Riding together and stopping for breaks together provides time for social interaction. Clearly, some cyclists just want to ride and/or just want the exercise. Those folks may not be candidates for your community ride. You cannot be everything to everyone. You must decide what type of rider you want to attract and keep.

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Educate riders.

The second advantage of the “no-drop” format is that inexperienced and/or slower riders will feel more comfortable/safe/included if they know they will not be left behind and do not feel they have to push beyond their comfort level to keep up. They will be more likely to come back and ride with you again. And because they are with more experienced riders, they will learn how to be better, safer riders. They will learn to pump up their tires, wear a helmet, carry water, raise their seat, pass on the left, signal when stopping, etc. As they become stronger and more confident cyclists, they are more likely to become a regular part of your group and more likely to be an advocate for cycling and trail development.



- **ESTABLISH A TRACKING SYSTEM:** Keep track of who your riders are. Get their name, address, phone number, and email. If they object, at least get their first name and zip code. You can use this list to send out information about future rides and other events. If you want your group to have some influence on future trail development, you will have the data to show how many people are participating and where they come from. These data are invaluable in influencing public decision makers and in the preparation of funding requests, which you may never do but your data could be very valuable to public officials or other organizations.
- **GET THE WORD OUT:** People will need to know about you. Here are some ideas:
 - Word of mouth will be your best advertisement as people talk to their friends about the great ride they had.
 - Facebook and other social media are easy, cheap and effective if you have someone who can monitor them and keep things up to date.
 - Posters and flyers are expensive but valuable if you can identify a few key spots to post them, like bike shops or community bulletin boards.
 - Make contact with your local newspaper or media outlet. They may write an article or announce your rides in a community calendar.
 - Be persistent. People often have to see information and hear about things numerous times before they respond. If you are consistent, your ride will eventually catch on.
- **WHAT ABOUT LIABILITY?:** What if someone gets hurt on a ride that you have organized? It is important to note that in 13 years and some 350 rides, FFRT has never had a serious injury. Your best protection is to do everything in your power to make sure that you offer a safe ride (see next section, "Ride Day: Ensure a Safe and Enjoyable Ride for Everyone," for suggestions).

Regardless of your efforts, the risk of an injury is always there. We suggest you consider carrying an individual umbrella liability policy. Please consult an attorney and/or your insurance agent about the issue of liability.

At some point, as your riders grow in numbers, another way to protect yourself is to affiliate yourself with an organization that does have insurance, such as a non-profit or government agency.

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**The best
advertisement is an
enjoyable ride.**



Ride Day: Ensure a Safe and Enjoyable Ride for Everyone

Running a safe and effective ride requires planning and thought. However, do not worry about getting everything perfect or you will never get started; many of the suggestions below evolved for FFRT over several years. Again, every group and community will be a little bit different, but to get you started, here is a list of things that have worked well for FFRT on ride day:

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If you are trying to build a group, everyone must feel welcome and included.

- **HAVE FUN:** Although there are people who ride just for the exercise, most people ride to have a good time, talk to people, see some new places, and/or enjoy the weather and scenery.
- **WELCOME PEOPLE:** Make sure everyone and especially new riders are greeted when they arrive, talked to during the ride, asked if they are enjoying themselves, etc. If you are trying to build a group, everyone must feel welcome and included. Ask who the new riders are during the announcements so everyone can welcome them. Your core members might make it their job to socialize with the new people during the ride especially if they came to the ride alone.
- **ANNOUNCEMENTS:** Before starting the ride, introduce the members of the core group so that new people will have some idea who the people in charge are. Introduce the leaders and sweeps (a sweep is a designated last rider) and review their roles in the ride (see below). Talk about the route, points of interest, and any potential safety concerns along the route. Regularly review safe riding tips especially if there are several new riders or if there is something that has been a problem on a previous ride.

Before the ride starts, ask all riders to introduce themselves so people can get to know each other by name. At the start of the FFRT rides, we usually ask people to introduce themselves with a first name and which city they live in. (Do not ask for information about jobs, careers, or other things that might indicate social status; bicycling is a great activity for cutting across lines usually drawn by income and education.)

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Encourage helmets!

- **HELMETS:** Encourage everyone to wear a helmet. FFRT has never made this a requirement, but we constantly remind people of the importance of a helmet and instruct them on how to wear one correctly. All experienced riders wear helmets and many have personal stories of how they would be dead if they hadn't. Most people eventually give in to group pressure and put on a helmet.



- **KEEP ON SCHEDULE:** Begin each ride on time, otherwise you leave later and later every week.
- **RULES OF THE ROAD:** Encourage and educate people to ride safely.
 - Know and obey traffic rules. If group leaders follow the rules, others are more likely to do so.
 - It is important for people riding in a group to avoid blocking traffic coming up from behind. Ride single file on the right if there is traffic.
 - Suggest a safe riding distance. People who ride in groups tend to ride too close together; this often causes crashes. Remind people to keep at least two bike lengths between them and the bike in front of them.
 - Be especially careful with children at busy crossings. Kids will follow the adult ahead of them. The adult may have time to get across when a light is changing or a car is approaching, but the child behind them may not. Encourage adults to be aware of children at street crossings.
 - More information on rules of the road is available on the web from the [League of Michigan Bicyclist](#) and other sites as well as from the SAGE office.
- **COMFORTABLE RIDE:** If you are committed to a comfortable ride for beginners and families, you need to:
 - Never leave anybody behind (see “drop”/ “no-drop” section).
 - Ride at about 10 mph.
 - Stop every 20 minutes or so for a short rest and water break.
 - Stop more often if the group is too spread out.
- **LEADERS & SWEEPS:** Each ride should have a designated leader that sets the pace of the ride and makes sure that everyone stays together. Sweeps are the last rider in the group; they do not let anyone fall behind them if it is a no-drop ride. If your group is larger than 20, it is helpful to break into two groups, each group having its own leader and, if possible, its own sweep. If you have more than one group but only one sweep, place the sweep with the last group.

Leaders and sweeps should wear safety vests so they are easily identified by new people, and of course, for their own safety in traffic.

If possible, leaders and sweeps should have some communication device so they can talk to each other if they encounter a problem. Cell phones seem to work for this (but don't ride and talk at the same time). FFRT has tried walkie-talkies but found their range to be a problem, usually just when you most need them.

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**Make sure people
are comfortable
with the pace.**

- o Here are some specifics for **leaders:**
 - Leaders must always be in front. Sometimes faster riders will try to move ahead of the leader, which creates confusion at street crossings, confusion about when and where the group will stop to rest, and difficulty keeping the group together. You need to make clear in the announcements at the beginning of the ride that no one should ride ahead of the leader.
 - Leaders stop the group at lights and major intersections to get everyone together and aid in a safe crossing.
 - Leaders check with riders at stops to make sure everyone is comfortable with the pace.
 - Leaders try to make new riders comfortable by talking to them and introducing them to others.

- o And specifics for **sweeps:**
 - Each ride needs a sweep if you are doing a “no-drop” ride.
 - Sweeps are the last rider in the group; they do not let anyone get behind them. If someone stops for some reason, the sweep stops too.
 - Sweeps try to reassure slower riders that they do not need to ride faster than they are comfortable with and that they will not be left behind. Sweeps also help make the decision about whether a particular rider is able to complete the entire ride.
 - It is helpful if the sweep carries repair equipment and knows how to fix a flat tire, a derailed chain, etc. FFRT sweeps now carry repair kits with extra tubes, tools, and first aid supplies. If a repair problem is going to take time to fix, the sweep should attempt to communicate that information to the leader so that the leader can adjust the ride accordingly.
 - New and inexperienced riders often show up to the rides with underinflated tires and other equipment problems. If the sweeps can correct these problems before the ride starts, the ride will run more smoothly.
 - Sweeps control crossings at major intersections. If you have groups of more than ten people, it helps to have more than one sweep. Since it is safer to cross major roads as a group, leaders stop at lights and major intersections and wait for the entire group to gather. When the sweeps arrive at the crossing, they determine when to cross and encourage riders to move quickly. Sweeps are the first riders into the intersection and stay there until everyone is across safely. If the light changes or traffic approaches, they stop the flow of riders until the intersection is clear again.

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**Never assume that
a car will stop.**

Just because the light is red, a sweep is standing in the middle of the traffic lane, or there are six people in the middle of the intersection, sweeps should never assume that a car will stop. Most drivers are courteous and careful when they see a group of cyclists, BUT it only takes one inattentive driver to create a terrible accident. Sweeps should always assume the worst.



- **OFFERING TWO RIDES:** As discussed earlier, if you have a big enough group and enough leaders, you can offer two rides, one for slower riders and one for faster riders. After years of trying, FFRT has never been particular successful at this. Riders do not seem to do well at self-selecting the right group and/or the size of the groups is very unequal and/or people don't want to be considered a "slow" rider. We have also tried the term "family ride" for the slower group without much success.
- **ENDING THE RIDE:** End each ride with a chance to socialize. FFRT ends most of their rides with cookies and a cold drink. Some people go straight home, but most stay for 10 or 15 minutes to chat with others. If you can get someone to bring the "treats," riders will usually finance the effort by dropping money periodically into a "treat can." You can keep this simple with store-bought cookies and water or juice boxes. What is important is the chance to talk and bring closure to the ride.

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Useful websites

CycleFit Sports Club: for endurance athletes; operates in southern Genesee County.

<https://sites.google.com/site/cyclefitsportsclub>

Friends of the Flint River Trail: regular Sunday rides in Flint.

<http://flintriver.org/blog/chapters/friends-of-the-flint-river-trail/>

Genesee Wanderers: information about a large and successful riding program for experienced riders. <http://www.geneseewanderers.org/>

League of Michigan Bicyclists: education and advocacy toolkits and well as information about organized rides in Michigan. <http://www.lmb.org>

League of American Bicyclists: national education and advocacy materials.

<http://www.bikeleague.org>

Michigan Fitness Foundation: information about how to create active communities.

<http://www.michiganfitness.org>

Michigan Trails and Greenway Alliance: help and information about trail development and advocacy issues. <http://www.michigantrails.org/>

Rails to Trails Conservancy: information about trails and building healthier places.

<http://www.railstotrails.org/index.html>

SAGE: information about active living, complete streets, other local organizations.

<http://www.crim.org/activeliving/Sage/>



**Safe & Active
Genesee for Everyone**