



NEW RULES FOR sharing the road

A guide for navigating downtown
Des Moines' new bike lanes

BY ANNE CAROTHERS-KAY

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Des Moines added just over 4 miles of bike lanes and lanes shared by bikes and cars downtown this summer to encourage bicycle commuters and to safely bring riders into the city core from its recreational trails.

But do cyclists and motorists know the rules for safely sharing the road?

Even avid bicyclists and conscientious drivers may be confused about new symbols or how to handle conventional bike lanes, let alone the left-side bike lanes, contra-flow lanes and “sharrows.”

The Business Record staff searched for an easy local guide of traffic do's and don'ts regarding bike lanes but couldn't find one.

We created this one for you, so regardless of how you get to work, you can get there safely.

“There are lots of people who are comfortable with the trail system, but we all know that trails don't lead to jobs and coffee shops and hardware stores and libraries, So we've got to get out on the street.”

Carl Voss, chairman of the Des Moines Bicycle Collective

OUR EXPERTS

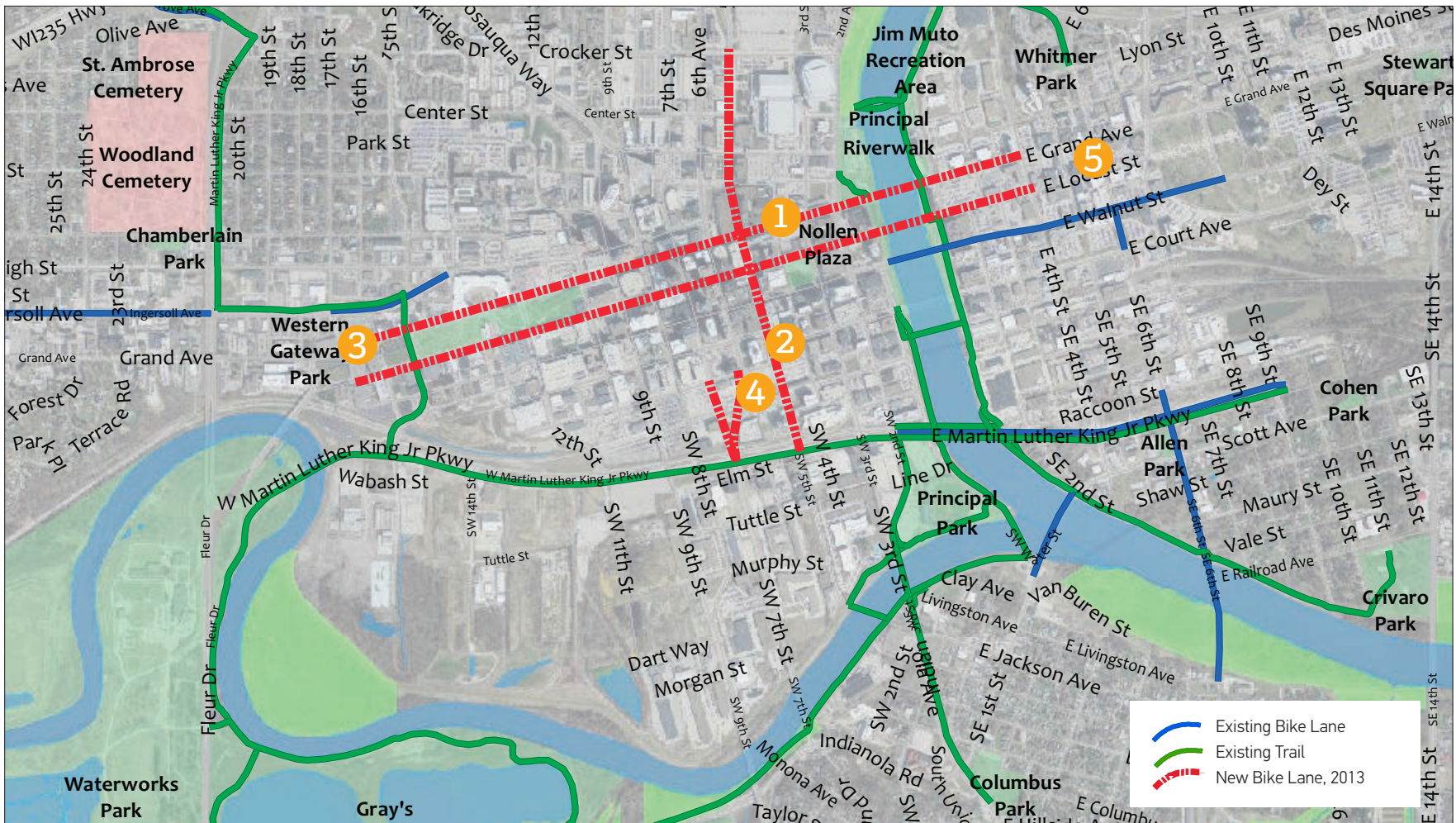


Carl Voss is chairman of the Des Moines Bicycle Collective. Voss has been commuting by bicycle since 1971, and he also served as chairman of the Des Moines Traffic Safety Committee.



Mike Ring is the principal traffic engineer for the city of Des Moines. He also rides his bike to work a few times a week and uses the bicycle lanes on Ingersoll Avenue.

NEW DOWNTOWN BIKE LANES



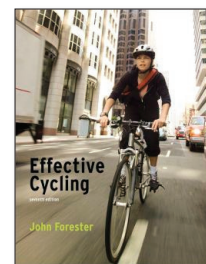
HOT SPOTS

- 1 Third Street and Grand Avenue:** When traveling West on Grand, the bike lane changes from the right (north) side of Grand Avenue to the left side of the street, with the aid of a traffic signal. Cyclists can push a button on the signal at Third Street to stop vehicle traffic from all four directions, so they can cross to the left-hand bike lane.
- 2 Fifth and Court Avenues:** Cycling north on Fifth Avenue, requires some unexpected maneuvers to safely cross this unusual intersection by bike. Here's what to do: Merge into the left-hand bike lane at the stoplight at Fifth and Cherry Street. When the stoplight turns green, bikes continue north in the left-side bike lane, bending with the curve but stopping or slowing at the entrance to Court Avenue. Check traffic from the east and west and when it is clear, signal a left turn to head north, once again in a right-hand bike lane.
- 3 Grand Avenue at 17th Street:** When traveling west on Grand, the bike lane suddenly ends at 17th Street, leaving cyclists few good options. However, you can move to the far left lane, get onto the sidewalk and cross Grand Avenue using the crosswalk if you plan to connect to the bike lanes on Ingersoll Avenue. Even better would be to employ the same tactic two blocks earlier at 15th Street, because a recreational trail goes north on 15th to connect with Ingersoll's bike lanes going west.

- 4 DART Central Station:** Bike lanes were created just to connect the recreational trail that runs along the south side of Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway to DART Central Station via Southwest Sixth and Seventh streets. Be aware that, riding north, you will have to merge onto the sidewalk on Sixth Avenue just before the railroad tracks.
- 5 East Village:** The bike lanes and sharrows on Grand and Locust end at East Fourth Street instead of at Southeast Sixth Street, where there is a recreational trail heading south.

“Cyclists fare best when they act and are treated as drivers of vehicles.”

John Forester, author of “Effective Cycling,” considered to be the bible for bicycling



TOP TRAFFIC TIP:

Cars and bicycles are bound by the same traffic rule: Do not turn across lanes of traffic. Cars should never turn across a bike lane to make a turn. Instead they should check the lane for bicycle traffic then merge across the bike lane to the far-right or far-left turning lane. Dotted bicycle lane markings leading up to most intersections are signals to merge for drivers and cyclists.

GLOSSARY:



CONVENTIONAL BIKE LANE

Generally a 5-foot-wide lane marked with solid lines on one or both sides and a bicycle icon. Bike lanes are designated space for bicycles. The solid lines are signals to cars to stay out of the bike lane.



CONTRA-FLOW LANE

A contra-flow bike lane is one that goes against oncoming traffic. Like highways, there are double-striped yellow lines to separate cyclists from oncoming traffic and to signal oncoming bicycle traffic to motorists. Ring said the contra-flow lanes, at six feet, are a little wider than normal bike lanes. The bike lane going north on Fifth Avenue from Mulberry Street to Crocker Street is a contra-flow lane.



DOTTED LINE MARKINGS ON BIKE LANES

Usually before an intersection, about 100 feet of dotted lines replace the solid lines on bike lanes. These dotted lines indicate that cars can cross the bike lanes OR that bikes may need to merge into another lane to turn. Specifically, cars that are traveling adjacent to a bike lane, should never turn across the bike lane to make a turn. Instead they should check the lane for bicycle traffic then merge, in the dotted lines space, across the bike lane to an interior turning lane.



SHARROW

The sharrow symbol describes a shared lane for bikes and cars in a roadway. The lane is marked periodically with a bicycle symbol with two chevrons over it. Because Locust Street is not as wide as Grand Avenue, traffic engineers designated one traffic lane as a sharrow, rather than adding a bike lane. The bike-chevron symbol is painted in the middle of the lane to suggest that bicyclists ride there, rather than along the right side of the lane. Why? Because drivers opening left-hand doors to exit from parked cars are a significant danger for bicyclists.



LEFT-SIDE BIKE LANE

A traffic signal enables bicylists to switch from right- to left-side bike lanes at Third Street and Grand Avenue. Traffic engineers generally prefer bike lanes to flow with traffic and to be on the right side of traffic. However, from Third to 17th streets, the Grand Avenue bike lane is on the left side of the one-way traffic street. Des Moines Traffic Engineer Mike Ring said this is because DART buses use the right side of Grand and engineers felt that dodging buses would be more dangerous for bicyclists. <http://bit.ly/167FKCF>



Anne Carothers-Kay is the Business Record's managing editor, who sometimes bicycles to or from the Business Record's office in the former downtown train depot. You can read about her experiences testing bike lanes for this story at <http://bit.ly/167FKCF>.