

U.S. Bicycle Route System - Gaining Local Agency Approval

By Kerry Irons with excerpts from Paul Vandenbosch

A key step in the development of a United States Bicycle Route (USBR) within a corridor as proposed by the American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials (AASHTO) is gaining the approval of all of the local agencies who have operational control of the streets, roads, and trails along the route. These agencies include road commissions, cities and towns, parks departments, townships, and sometimes even non-profit trail groups. In order for a state DOT (department of transportation) to submit a route approval application to AASHTO, they must confirm that every involved local agency has approved the route. Gaining these agency approvals can be the most time consuming part of developing a route.

For more information on the USBR program, please see: www.adventurecycling.org/routes-and-maps/us-bicycle-route-system

United States Bicycle Route Establishment Procedure: There is no one way to gain support from local authorities. Below are examples based upon hands-on experience in several states.

Example High Level Route Approval Procedure

- A team is formed of relevant governmental entities, advocacy organizations, volunteers, and/or other business or tourism groups as appropriate. Examples might be a group of MPOs/RPCs, CVBs, or municipalities interested in developing a USBR. Alternatively, it might be advocates and volunteers or a combination thereof.
- The team partners with the State DOT, the DOT of adjacent states or provinces, and other stakeholder groups as appropriate to gain buy-in for establishing or modifying a USBR. Example stakeholder groups could include road commissions, municipalities, MPOs, bicycle/trail advocacy groups, etc.
- The team proposes destinations along the corridor, through which the USBR should pass.
- The team develops a draft route passing through as many desired destinations and meeting as many of the specific route criteria as practicable.
- The team prepares a draft map and route log to communicate with local agencies and other stakeholders.
- Once the team prepares a draft route, it may seek input from stakeholders. Affected road organizations, municipalities, Metropolitan Planning Organizations, bicycle/trail advocacy organizations, and other stakeholder groups can be sources of feedback. Feedback may come from direct contact with affected agencies, public meetings, internet postings, etc. while providing a means for participants to provide feedback. The process of gaining local agency approvals also generates feedback as suggested or required route changes are made to satisfy those local agencies.
- The team commissions someone or a group to contact the local agencies to obtain official approvals (resolutions or letters of support) and forwards those support resolutions to the DOT.
- The team finalizes the map and route log to include all the changes required by local agencies. This is for the state DOT to use in completing an AASHTO application to create or modify a USBR.
- The state DOT submits the application to AASHTO.

If a draft route already exists, most of the above steps are not required. Examples of existing routes might be cross-state rides, Adventure Cycling routes, regional bike routes, state bike routes, etc.

Example Process for Gaining Local Agency Approval

- Develop a table of all of the agencies on the proposed route and the associated contact information. Include agency name, contact name, phone number(s), and e-mail, and a place to list contact dates and notes about the contacts. Using a table in a document or a spreadsheet is an easy way to do this, and a spreadsheet of the route log can be the best choice: additional columns can be added to a working copy to include this information. It is easy to find contact information on the Internet in most cases. If not using a route log, include route details through each respective jurisdiction so that when you are talking to the agency, you will have that detail at your fingertips. TIP: list the agencies in the order they appear along the route so that if you are asked about adjacent jurisdiction you can reply easily because the information is in the “next line” of your document. This is why the expanded route log is typically the best approach for this.
- Develop relevant support documents (examples below) to share with local agencies.

- Contact each agency. TIP: it is best if the first the local agency hears about the route is from this direct contact rather than from news articles, local bike advocates, public meetings, etc. You want to be sure that the agency is getting the full story and accurate information and doesn't feel blind-sided. Resistance can build before they are fully informed.
 - It typically makes most sense to start with a phone call. People get a lot of e-mail and it is hard to get through to busy officials except by a phone call, and this is your chance to answer questions and to begin to build a relationship. Expect to have to call repeatedly to get through to the right person. Often a county or city clerk or administrative assistant can identify the right contact.
 - On the first contact, ask if you have contacted the right agency. Ask "Who owns the road?" For example, in small communities, the county/parish may be responsible for the roads, so that community does not need to sign off on the route.
 - On the first contact, make sure to mention that this effort is under the responsibility your state transportation department and AASHTO, as these agencies carry significant weight with local officials. Also mention which organization(s) at the state and regional level are participating and leading the effort, and the organization which you represent. Adventure Cycling can be mentioned as a 50,000 member national non-profit to give credibility to the request.
 - On the first contact, briefly explain the USBR System, bicycle touring (long distance, multi-day, not local riders, only a few riders per day) and the process for gaining route approval. It is important to communicate that this is route designation, not a construction project and not planning for an event. Offer to supply information by e-mail (background information, route description, resolution template, etc.). Ask what the process is for the agency to approve a resolution or provide a letter of support.
 - Emphasize that final route approval is in the hands of the local agency, that the route application cannot be submitted without their agreement. This gives them a feeling of local control, which can be an issue in some jurisdictions.
- Continue regular contacts. It is rare that the initial contact will be sufficient to gain a support resolution. In some cases it will take more than one contact before your request is taken seriously. Agency personnel are busy people, and often this request will "fall off the pile" and you have to re-initiate the contact. The table of contact information is quite useful here; reminding them of the number of contacts and dates of those contacts shows the agency that this is a serious effort and will not go away until a resolution is approved. While approvals are sometimes obtained quickly, it is not uncommon that several months of contacts are needed.
- Be prepared to offer to make presentations at agency board meetings. Anything that can be done to make it easier for agency personnel to "make the case" will be appreciated, and those personnel often will not "take up the cause" on their own.
- As approvals are obtained, be sure that the agencies forward copies to the DOT and to yourself.
- As approvals are obtained, share that information with other agencies. There is an element of "we'll see what our neighbors are doing" and so this will help move agencies forward.

General Tips:

- Recognize that sometimes there is a multi-level approval process before the final resolution can be obtained. Examples might be a planning commission that reports to a city council, or a transportation board that reports to a road commission. In larger communities there often is some sort of citizens group that is in the loop as well. Sometimes the final approval is simply a "stamp of approval" on the decision of the lower level board so it is that lower group that will need to be convinced.
- Be prepared to offer an "official letter of request" from one of the organizations involved. Typically this would come from a state level advocacy organization or from Adventure Cycling. Some agencies need to have something "for their files" and to assure themselves that this "voice on the phone" is representing a real organization.
- If you need to prepare a map, the preferred mapping tool is RideWithGPS. RWGPS is free, easy to use, there are lots of online tutorials, and it can export GPX and KML files that DOT mapping departments prefer. It also creates an abbreviated route log that can be pasted into a spreadsheet to create a full route log. Keep the maps up to date: tell the agencies that there will be occasional map updates but that their link to the RWGPS will always take them to the current map.
- Recognize that sometimes one agency will request a route change that requires another agency to accept a change of the route in their jurisdiction. This is can be a challenging exercise especially when an already passed resolution needs to be changed, so make sure that "hand holding" takes place between adjacent agencies to minimize such changes.
- Accept that local agencies may have various reasons to choose a different route from the one proposed. These may include not wanting cyclists on a given road for fear of creating traffic issues for cars, concerns about road surface quality, the desire to use roads with paved shoulders, etc. Road commission members often have a very different view

than a cyclist might of what makes a good riding road. Balancing the “best” route choice with local desires will require compromise, and it may require accepting a “sub-optimal” local request in order to move the process forward. Once the full route is approved, agencies can be lobbied to amend the route.

- Designating a USBR doesn’t change the nature or use of a road, street, or trail for other purposes. It doesn’t impose any constraints about the pavement itself or the right-of-way. No changes are required to meet any standards.
- Manage expectations with the local agencies so that they are not expecting a flood of cyclists in their jurisdiction. This is a double-edged sword; it is good to have locals anticipating a tourism opportunity but they may also balk if they think that their roads will become crowded with cyclists. Talk in terms of “a couple thousand riders per year (10 per day)” so that they don’t anticipate “hundreds of riders per day.”
- Repeat as needed that the local agency controls the final route choice. If they get the feeling that they are being forced into approval this can build resistance.
- If you know of active local bike clubs or trail organizations along the route, keep them informed about the project. They need to communicate to their membership so that the cycling community presents a “united front” to local agencies. If an agency gets conflicting route selection messages from local cyclists it can be very difficult to keep the process on track.

Sample introductory email to send to local agency after initial phone contact (can also serve as a phone script for the first contact):

Thanks for taking the time to talk with me [or I left a voice mail with you] about USBR XX through XXXXX. This project is part of a national effort (through AASHTO) to build a US Bicycle Route System and is being led in our state by [STATE DOT], [LEAD AGENCY OR AGENCIES], [LIST OTHER KEY STAKEHOLDERS], and the Adventure Cycling Association.

Below is some background information and a template for a resolution for your agency to endorse and send to [state DOT]. Here are the addresses to which you can mail or email a resolution of support from your XXXX. Feel free to edit the resolution as needed. [STATE DOT CONTACT PERSON] is the one who will officially submit the route approval application to AASHTO.

Name
 XXXX Department of Transportation
 Email
 phone
 Address, City, State, Zip

Your Name
 Organization Name (you can use Adventure Cycling)
 email
 phone

Just so you have it on paper, the proposed route through XXXX uses the following (LIST ROADS, STREETS, and TRAILS). The route proposal supplied is just that; a proposal. Local agencies will be the ones who determine the final route as they are the ones who have to assure support for the route to <STATE DOT>.

Here is a link to the map of the entire route: [RWGPS map link]. There may be changes to this map as each local jurisdiction provides feedback so please refer to the link rather than copying the map via screen shot, etc. The general route for USBR XX is from [CITY OR LOCATION NAMES WHERE ROUTE ENTERS AND EXITS STATE PLUS COMMUNITIES AND COUNTIES/PARISHES, ETC. ALONG THE ROUTE].

USBR XX continues [GIVE GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE ENTIRE ROUTE CORRIDOR TO WHERE EVER IT TERMINATES ON BOTH ENDS INCLUDING KEY DESTINATIONS, ATTRACTIONS, ETC.].

You can find a huge amount of background information on the USBRS at www.adventurecycling.org/routes-and-maps/us-bicycle-route-system including a downloadable map for the entire proposed system.

As I hear from the agencies in your region, I will keep you informed about their progress. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Contact Name
Represented Organization
Phone number

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Background information on USBR route designation to share with local agencies:

There is no inherent liability for local agencies per the federal Transportation Research Board:
http://onlinepubs.trb.org/onlinepubs/nchrp/nchrp_lrd_53.pdf [Some states have specific issues or have already addressed this issue. Supply local information when available.]

To view AASHTO information on the US Bicycle Route System: <https://route.transportation.org/us-bicycle-routes/>

Signage is nice, but not required. There are a number of ways a route can be designated including maps (paper or Internet), signs, pavement markings, downloadable GPS coordinates, etc.

The choice of roads for a US Bicycle Route is a tradeoff between low traffic, direct routing, access to services (bike shops, motels, campgrounds, etc.), access to points of interest, and scenic roads. The best route for a family weekend bike ride may not be the best route for someone on a multi-day long distance bicycle trip.

Long distance bicycle tourists are experienced road riders and used to varying quality of road surface, absence of paved shoulders, and car and truck traffic. The number of cyclists who might use a given route is difficult to predict, but five to ten riders per day (1,000-2,000 per season) would be considered a significant increase in usage once a route is designated.

A change in the route can be proposed to the <STATE DOT> and they propose the change to AASHTO. AASHTO has accepted every new route and route change requested by state DOTs. Route changes can be made twice per year.

Designating a USBR does not impose any constraints or restrictions on the use of a road, street, trail or right-of-way. It's current or future status or use for any other purpose is not changed.

There is no requirement that roads for US Bicycle Routes meet the guidelines in the AASTHO Guide for Bicycle Facilities. This was explicitly considered and it has been written into the process that there are no specific requirements for road or trail standards. It is recognized that local "engineering judgment" will determine when a road is suitable for inclusion in a USBR designation.

[IF THERE IS ALREADY CYCLO-TOURIST TRAFFIC ON LOCAL SECTIONS OF THE PROPOSED ROUTE, HIGHLIGHT THAT INFORMATION.]

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Support Resolution Template

Whereas bicycle tourism is a growing industry in North America, contributing over \$70 billion a year to the economies of communities that provide facilities for such tourists; and

Whereas the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) has designated a corridor crossing [section of state] to be developed as United States Bike Route XX (USBR XX), and

Whereas the [sponsoring organizations] and the Adventure Cycling Association, with the cooperation of the [STATE] Department of Transportation and other stakeholders, have proposed a specific route to be designated as USBR XX, a map of which is herein incorporated into this resolution by reference, and

Whereas the proposed route for USBR XX comes through <CITY/VILLAGE/COUNTY/PARISH> and can therefore provide a benefit to our residents and businesses, and

Whereas we have investigated the proposed route and found it to be a suitable route, and desire that the route be designated so that it can be mapped and signed, thereby promoting bicycle tourism in our area,

Therefore be it resolved that <CITY/VILLAGE/COUNTY/PARISH> hereby expresses its approval and support for the development of USBR XX, and requests that the appropriate officials see to it that the route is officially designated by AASHTO as soon as this can be achieved, and authorizes the posting of signs within the <NAME_OF_JURISDICTION> right-of-way identifying the route through the community once the official designation has been made.

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Letter of Support Template

*U.S. Bicycle Route System
Template Letter of Support*

Organizational Letterhead

Date

Dear [NAME],

The [ORG/AGENCY] would like to offer our support for the designation of proposed U.S. Bicycle Route XX (USBR XX) through our community. We recognize that bicycle tourism is a growing industry in North America, contributing \$47 billion a year to the economies of communities that provide facilities for such tourists. As a community, we stand to benefit from this opportunity both economically and from the health and environmental related benefits of encouraging bicycle travel in our region.

The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) has designated a bicycle route corridor through [REGION] to be developed as USBR XX that connects [CITIES AND/OR SCENIC, HISTORIC DESTINATIONS AND/OR TRANSPORTATION HUBS]. Our [CITY/VILLAGE/COUNTY/PARISH] lies within that corridor and we have investigated the proposed route and found it to be suitable for bicycle tourists.

I am contacting you to indicate my [ORGANIZATION/AGENCY'S] support for designating USBR XX through [CITY/COUNTY]. using the following roads and trails: [ROAD/STREET//TRAIL LIST] .

The proposed route for USBR XX will provide a benefit to our residents and businesses and we endorse having the route mapped and signed, thereby promoting bicycle tourism in our area, Therefore [CITY/VILLAGE/COUNTY/PARISH] hereby expresses its support for USBR XX, and requests that the appropriate officials nominate the route for AASHTO designation as soon as this can be achieved.

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Definitions

- AASHTO - American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials
- USBR - A Route approved by AASHTO as a US Bicycle Route.
- Corridor - An area proposed by AASHTO for a potential USBR route.
- MPO - Municipal Planning Organization
- RPC - Regional Planning Commission
- CVB – Convention and Visitors Bureau
- Destination - A location through which the route should pass, as determined by the project team, DOT, or other key stakeholders.
- DOT - A state department of transportation.
- Route log - A turn by turn description of a bicycle route which includes road/street/trail names, distance traveled on each road/street/trail, and direction of travel on each road/street/trail, from the starting point to ending point of the state corridor.

- Local jurisdiction or agency – Any agency which has operational control over a street, roadway, or trail; in other words, the “owner” of a portion of the route.
- Route Application - An application for a USBR prepared on a form provided by AASHTO.
- Specific Route Criteria: Considerations when choosing roads and trails. Examples might be:
 - Offer services and amenities such as restaurants, accommodations, camping, bicycle shops, and convenience/grocery stores at appropriate intervals.
 - Go into the centers of metropolitan areas, using low-traffic and/or off-road bikeways when possible. Bypass routes may be considered to accommodate users who don't wish to enter the city or who are seeking a less urban experience.
 - Include spurs to target destinations (universities or other educational institutions, recreational areas, or other attractions) and to multimodal nodes such as airports and rail, bus, and transit stations.
 - Follow natural corridors and provide terrain suitable for cycling, avoiding extremely hilly and limited visibility winding roads with heavy traffic.
 - Combine appropriate levels of daily traffic, truck traffic, paved shoulders, lane striping, adequate sight distance, and traffic speed in order to be bicycle friendly.
 - In urban areas, be suitable for utility cycling (commuting, access to shopping, schools and universities, recreation centers, etc.).
 - Include major existing and planned bike routes, including both on-road facilities and off-road shared use paths and trails that are suitable for road bikes.
 - May include short stretches of high quality unpaved roads if needed to connect highly desirable paved road sections. (These roads should maintain the standard of road bike suitability).
- State Advocacy Organization - A statewide or regional recognized non- profit organization whose purpose is to promote bicycling and/or bicycle trails.