

Stillwater, Minnesota:

Creating a Lively and Livable Community



Mike Lyner

Editor's Note: Mike Lyner is an active cycling advocate in the Stillwater area, President of the Chilkoot Velo Cycling Club, with about 100 members, a coach with the Stillwater High School Mountain Bike & Nordic Ski Teams, and President of the Friends of Lily Lake. A recently retired Architect, Mike is a "built environment" sustainability expert who also serves on Sustainable Stillwater's Green Business Awards Committee and their Bicycle-Friendly Community Certification Committee. His wife is the Rotarian in their house, and he has been designing the multiple routes used for the Rotary Club's "Bridge the Valley - Bike Rally," held last August 15th.

Originally a Native village along the river, then a lumbering boom town, Stillwater, Minnesota, gained national fame for antiques and rare books. Now Stillwater teems with silent sports habitats, trails, and waterways. With the collaboration of many governmental and community organizations and its citizenry, all networking their assets together, Stillwater has become a vibrant and resilient city for silent sports enthusiasts.

All of this sporting opportunity locates along the 252-mile Saint Croix River National Scenic Riverway, which forms the boundary between Minnesota and Wisconsin. Stillwater draws its name from the calmness of waters near



SASCA providing Reid Park trail information. From the SASCA website: "Stillwater Area Scholastic Cycling Advocates (SASCA) a 501(c)3 non-profit organization made up of dedicated volunteers who share a lifetime love of bicycle riding, and who want to share that love with kids. One of our purposes is to support the Stillwater Area Schools Mountain Bike Team (MTB), a St. Croix Valley competitive co-ed riding program for students in 7th-12th grades. Kids learn mountain biking skills, develop teamwork and gain confidence, all the while engaging in an activity that will provide them a lifetime of fun and fitness."

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Enjoying a Lily Lake Fishing Dock at sunset. Water clarity has been increasing annually after the removal and encapsulation of many phosphorus sources.

its downtown and is recognized as “The birthplace of Minnesota” (1848). With a population of about 20,000, sitting 20 miles east of Minneapolis-St Paul, from which it draws many of its visitors, Stillwater has some little-known facts, which include: In 1921, Charles Strite invented the automatic pop-up bread toaster in Stillwater; and Denis McDonough, born and raised in Stillwater, became President Obama’s White House Chief of Staff.

The Greater Stillwater Chamber of Commerce and the City Council cooperate to increase the number of visitors, engaging citizens and local organizations in its Strategic Plan. For example, last winter City Councilman Mike Polehna encouraged local citizens to run a Fat Bike Rally downtown, “To show people that Stillwater is a year-round venue.” This got 75 registrants in its first year, utilizing a city waterfront park, Brown’s Creek Trail, the St Croix River Crossing Loop Trail, and the Valley View Park mountain bike trail. The Chilkoot Velo Cycling Club has also worked with Discover Stillwater to provide their tourism clientele with free access to the bike club’s 30+ Ride with GPS route maps of the area, for visual and voice navigation.

The Stillwater Area High School is well known for its academic as well as athletic prowess. Significant adult

volunteerism has supported a student Nordic skiing program with about 100 participants annually, for many years, earning several state championships. This program also assisted none other than Jessie Diggins who, teamed with Kikkan Randall, became the USA’s first Nordic Olympic Gold Medalist, man or woman. Following in the Nordic skiing tradition of All Are Welcome, Stillwater’s high school and middle school now support a student NICA mountain bike team of about 100 cyclists, already with several state championships.

Cycling Delights

Five years ago, the Stillwater Area High School’s Mountain Bike Team (SMTB) requested permission to build and maintain a 3-mile single-track MTB trail within Valley View Park in Oak Park Heights, which is part of the Greater Stillwater Area. (This area includes Afton to Marine on the St. Croix, Bayport, Lake Elmo, Oak Park Heights, and historic Stillwater.) Following that, the City of Lake Elmo asked the SMTB to build a trail in Reid Park, one of its underutilized parks. This trail has since been adopted by the Chilkoot Velo Cycling Club to help keep the trail maintained. These trails, in addition to the nearby 6-mile Sunfish Lake Park flow trail that

Lake Elmo recently had professionally built, and the Lake Elmo Park Reserve, a Washington County park with several multi-purpose trails, now gives the SMTB and our whole local community four outstanding single-track trails within easy riding distance of the high school.

Running/Walking Utopias

The American Trail Runners Association (ATRA) recently featured Stillwater as 1 of 36 “Featured Trail Towns” which, in their minds, are the better places in the country to live or visit if you are a runner. Several asphalt biking and hiking trails radiate out from Stillwater. The Minnesota DNR manages the Gateway/Brown’s Creek rail trails, along with the Gateway/Brown’s Creek Trail Association. Meanwhile, Wisconsin’s St Croix County manages the new 5-mile St Croix River Crossing Loop Trail, with the St. Croix Bike and Pedestrian Trails Coalition assisting. In addition, just outside of town, are many large county and state parks with significant grass and gravel walking/running trails.

It was determined that Stillwater’s historic Lift Bridge was becoming a bottleneck for traffic between Minnesota and Wisconsin. After many years of community debate and environmental



Cycling clubs doing good work via Adopt-a-Park programs for the Silent Sports and greater Stillwater community.



New St. Croix Crossing Bridge. Unique engineering created a long-span, low-profile, extradosed bridge (hybrid design between a box girder bridge and a stay cable bridge), with adjacent pedestrian and bike trail.



St Croix River Crossing Loop Trail Map indicating the 5-mile trail between the renovated lift bridge and the new extradosed bridge.

studies, the new and spectacular extradosed St Croix Crossing Bridge was built. (An extradosed bridge design is a hybrid design between a box girder and a stay cable bridge.) As part of this project, however, cooperation between Minnesota and Wisconsin's Departments of Transportation enabled the building of the St Croix River Crossing Loop Trail. This 5-mile trail now has many daily users, including walkers, runners, bikers, and skaters. It's the right distance for a good walk or run while chatting with friends, with spectacular views of the river landscape and downtown Stillwater. And there are always welcoming coffee shops, bars, or park benches to greet you at the end.

With the construction of the new highway bridge, and the conversion of the old lift bridge for pedestrians and

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Stillwater's Historic Lift Bridge, recently renovated for pedestrian and cyclist use only.

PHOTO BY JULIE GORDON.

bikes only, downtown Stillwater is a much quieter and more intimate place for Silent Sports elites, recreationalists, sight-seeing family members, and shoppers.

Water Joys

If you are into water sports, Stillwater, of course adjacent to the St. Croix River, is also surrounded by many of the state's 10,000 lakes. The Middle St Croix Watershed Management Organization has worked diligently with the City, DNR, and Friends of Lily Lake to return Lily Lake, a small city lake that used to be a city gem for fishing and swimming, back to a point where its water quality has improved enough to soon be removed from the State of Minnesota's Impaired Waters List.

The Wild Rivers Conservancy (formerly the St Croix River Association) along with the National Park Service and others create opportunities for people to experience and care for the Wild and Scenic River National Park through their

mission: "Inspire stewardship to forever ensure the rare ecological integrity of the St. Croix and Namekagon Riverway."

Putting the Pieces of Success Together

Several community organizations have contributed to Stillwater's success, with devoted volunteers to carry their missions through. The following two formed the perfect recipe:

Stillwater Sunrise Rotary: Their mission: "A diverse group of leaders committed to making our local and global communities a better place to live." Their clubs also have active and connected networks to other Rotary Clubs. A recent inaugural event, "Bridge the Valley - Bike Rally," provided 6 routes of differing types and lengths to about 500 riders. The event was named to hopefully bridge several states, cities, and communities together, literally and figuratively, while exploring our beautiful surrounding countryside. While providing a great event to our community, it was also a

fundraiser where much of the proceeds are returned to the local community. **Sustainable Stillwater:** Their mission: to "Create and support local initiatives that promote sustainability and seek to preserve our environment and champion a healthy and resilient community." Sustainable Stillwater has pieced together several initiatives combining to make Stillwater earth, resident, and visitor-friendly. These efforts include Bicycle-Friendly Community Certification, Complete Streets, Pollinator Gardens, Bird City, GreenStep City, Green Business Awards, Adopt-a-Drain Program, Electric Vehicle promotion, and others.

If your community doesn't seem as vibrant and resilient as it should be, try engaging your community organizations and citizenry. Be a catalyst in assisting your community staff and elected officials with ways to better do their jobs to make your community as lively and livable as possible, for silent sports enthusiasts and their families. As Stillwater, its government, citizens, organizations, and people have shown — it works! 🍷