

ENVIRONMENT

Cycling gets push in Lamphun as residents tire of cars, noise

Want B220m network of lanes stretching 33km, to create country's longest bicycle route

If residents of Muang Lamphun have their way, the small town will be turned into a bicycle town with a model bike lane that lets local people take this mode of environmentally-friendly transportation into their everyday life.

A project to build a network of bike routes, stretching more than 33.2 kilometres at a cost of 220 million baht, is being proposed to the government.

If approved, it would be the country's longest and most complete bicycling route.

The idea to promote all-out bicycle use has been adopted in a bid to prevent Lamphun from becoming another Chiang Mai, its twin city beleaguered with traffic jams, traffic noise and air pollution.

The project is a big step forward from the launch of a campaign on bicycles initiated five years ago by Prapat Poocharoen, former mayor of Lamphun municipality.

He said bicycles could help preserve the peaceful lifestyle of this 1,300-year-old town.

"We want to make this town a unique place where residents don't need to buy cars and motorcycles," said Mr Prapat, who is running for another term in elections later this month.

In fact, bicycles are already part of daily life.

Municipal police patrol on bicycles. Cycling is a popular form of workout for local people. Schools gave students free bicycles in exchange for recycled garbage.

A survey conducted by the municipality last year showed 44% of residents ride bicycles every day, mostly for commuting and physical exercise.

More importantly, 95% of the

ANCHALEE KONGRUT

respondents said they would leave their cars at home and turn to cycling if a safe bicycle lane is provided.

Under the bike lane network project, 24 streets around temples and tourists attractions would be developed into bicycle lanes for eco-tourism while 25 major roads would get a separate bicy-

A survey conducted by the municipality last year showed 44% of residents ride bicycles every day, mostly for commuting and physical exercise. More importantly, 95% of the respondents said they would leave their cars at home and turn to cycling if a safe bicycle lane is provided.

cle path. Footpaths will be developed into bike lanes.

Included in the network will be a bicycle lane on the picturesque Chiang Mai-Lamphun local road.

The proposed network will add to the city's first bike lane, covering three kilometres, that circled temples and a scenic ancient dike in the inner part of the city, as well as an extended part, now under construction as part of a plan to promote eco-tourism at Mae Kuang dam and riverside tourists spots.

The extended part received a budget of 50 million baht from the government.

The municipality also plans to impose vehicle speed limits to make the bike lane safe. Car users are advised to take bypass roads which will be completed later this year.

Lamphun municipality is one of the 14 municipalities across the country seeking to promote cycling as an alternative means of transport.

The others are Lampang, Chiang Mai, Si Sa Ket, Nakhon Ratchasima, Krabi, Phuket, Pattani, Narathiwat, Warin Chamrap, Maha Sarakham, Nakhon Si Ayutthaya, Ubon Ratchathani and Phrae.

In 2002, all 14 municipalities were given 500,000 baht by the Energy Policy and Planning Office (formerly the National Energy Policy Office) to conduct a feasibility study on bicycle lane construction.

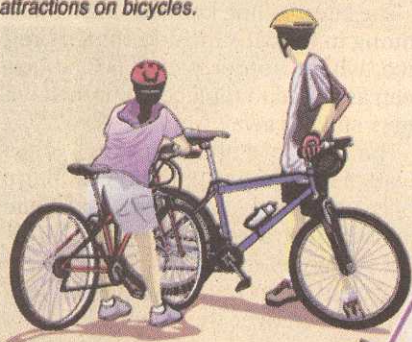
Chavalit Pichalai, director of the EPPO's energy policy and planning division, said municipalities that produced outstanding studies such as that by Muang Lamphun would receive endorsement in seeking grants from the state or foreign funding sources.

Thongchai Panswad, president of the Thai Cycling Club, a member of the committee which is evaluating the 14 projects for the EPPO, said Lamphun municipality was the only town that put bicycle lane expansion in the town's development master plan for 2002-2006 and has campaigned to promote the use of bicycles.

"Bicycle lanes are more about creating a new attitude that views bicycles as another form of transport like cars and motorcycles," said Mr Thongchai, who has campaigned for bicycle lanes for more than 20 years.

Lamphun Municipality's bicycle lane project

Lamphun Municipality plans to build bicycle lane on 45 streets with total length of 33.33 kilometres. The bicycle lane network will provide alternative and environmental-friendly transportation for residents while tourists can enjoy visiting 19 temples and other cultural attractions on bicycles.



Mr Thongchai, who recently completed a 500-kilometre cycling trip through the Netherlands, said cycle lane networks that take cyclists into small sois and communities were important. Otherwise, the route would be left unused just like the ones in Bangkok.

The city's existing seven bike routes

were underused. The first bike lane built on the footpath of Ramkhamhaeng road to Klong Tan road more than 20 years ago was a flop.

Cyclists did not use it because they had to stop at Klong Tan where the lane ended. "It was then occupied by food vendors who set up stalls," Mr Thongchai said.