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OPINION: When Beltline stroll becomes roller derby

Bill Torpy

6-7 minutes

Ichter was riding the [Eastside Trail near the insanely popular](#) Ponce City Market when a group of women walking four abreast suddenly veered left as he started to pass. He then cut right to avoid them and suddenly faced two bikes heading his way on the wrong side of the path. Ichter said he wasn't going fast (maybe 8 mph), but he had to make an instant choice: Absorb a head-on wreck with another bike. Or take his chances with a recently planted sapling.

He picked Door #2. Hello, emergency room.

"There's a lack of self-awareness, or they're oblivious or they're just not courteous," said Ichter about some of his fellow Beltline gadabouts.

He's not picking sides — or a fight — with bicyclists or pedestrians who share the 14-foot-wide strip of concrete. (It's now 18 feet on much of the Eastside.) He often rides a 20-mile exercise route on the Beltline and sees a lot going on out there. He loves the glorified path and almost all who share it. Well, maybe not all — there are the thoughtless dog owners with retractable leashes that threaten bikers, skaters, scooter riders and runners.

"I'd rather hit the owner than the dog," he said. "It's not the dog's

fault."

It's dangerous out there in the wilds of the Atlanta Beltline, the gathering point for probably more than 2 million mobile folks each year. Most are simply there for the fresh air, exercise and sense of community. But along with that mix comes bicyclists riding like they're training for the Tour de France and gaggles of walkers who seem like they just stumbled out of Happy Hour.

◀Caption

Bob Ichter, an Atlanta artist and Beltline bicyclist, broke his hand last year trying to avoid errant walkers and wrong-way bicyclists.

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Recently, a fellow named AI posted a complaint on Nextdoor about an aggressive biker using pedestrians like an obstacle course. He then ventured the idea of banning bicycles from the Beltline. Well, you'd think he called for kicking puppies. Almost immediately, there were hundreds of passionate posts speaking to the chasm between those afoot and those who are wheeled.

The online fist-shaking largely went like this:

Hey, belligerent bicyclists, slow down and watch out for those around you!

Listen, dawdlers, why don't you go loiter where you won't be in the way!!

C'mon guys, we pedestrians and bicyclists ought not argue, it's motorists who are the real enemy.

Yeah, well you bicyclists complain about cars and then act like them on the Beltline.

Yes, the folks at the Atlanta Beltline Inc. have heard all these complaints and last month installed signs to try to create an awareness about trail etiquette. Things like: "Keep it moving." "Slower traffic stay right." "Share the trail, y'all. More than two is a wall." "Heads up, cupcake." Or "Slow down, Sugar."

The last few aphorisms are an attempt at using Southern charm to nudge trail users into behaving, said Jenny Odom, the Beltline communications manager. One can guess what the signs on New Jersey trails might say.

I talked with about 15 Beltline travelers and heard all the complains that one sees online, only nicer. Remember, people are usually more friendly in person.

◀Caption

Annie Christopher, front right, chats with a fellow coming from the Murder Kroger on the Atlanta Beltline. With her, from left, are Amy Shay, Chiara Waller, Sarah Bryant, Susanne Muntsing and her dog, Frankie. Photo by Bill Torpy

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Annie Christopher, front right, chats with a fellow coming from the Murder Kroger on the Atlanta Beltline. With her, from left, are Amy Shay, Chiara Waller, Sarah Bryant, Susanne Muntsing and her dog, Frankie. Photo by Bill Torpy

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I came upon a group of five ladies and a little dog walking north toward Piedmont Park. They formed a three-two wedge to prevent spilling over the middle line.

One of them, Chiara Waller, said there needs to be separate lanes for the wheeled and unwheeled, like she has seen in Europe. “All we need is instructions,” she said.

I ventured to her that Americans are largely immune to instruction, that speed limit signs are only posted so that drivers know what they are getting away with. And many Atlanta drivers see stop signs as aspirational, not mandatory.

Susanne Muntsing, one of the walkers, noted that it's dangerous to

talk with your arms while walking the Beltline — that you might thwack a cyclist passing from behind or suffer a broken pinkie.

“They’re like snow boarders on the mountain,” said Annie Christopher, to knowing nods.

Hans Klein, a Georgia Tech professor who bikes to work, is well aware of the ongoing debate. “The bicyclists are adamant that it’s a bike path. And the pedestrians are adamant that they don’t want to get run over,” he said. “But everybody is a good guy here.”

Sure, Klein is a cyclist and would rather not be forced to continually chug along like he’s riding on training wheels. But he understands how walkers see it: “The Beltline has turned into a linear park; Atlanta’s most popular park. And if you’re in a park, you have the right to be clueless.”

Klein, who has created a website called savethebeltline.net, said the Beltline might have been envisioned as a transportation corridor but has, by popular choice, become a park. He echoed Waller’s comments that the path needs to be widened with bike lanes separated from the walkers.

The Beltline has extra space set aside for the possibility of light-rail one day. But Klein argues that [having dual light-rail lines squeezed alongside](#) the concrete path, as is being planned, “risks killing that linear park.”

That’s another real good argument. But one for another time.