



Photo: Chris LeDew

Sharrows (lane markings) on the Bridge of Lions in St. Augustine encourage riders to take the lane to avoid a dangerous right edge of the pavement.

First Coast Chapter...

## FDOT traffic ops leader has a passion for bike/ped safety

by Jeff Hohlstein, First Coast Chapter Director

**W**hen you first meet him, **Chris LeDew**, Assistant District Traffic Operations Engineer, Florida

Department of Transportation, District Two, is an imposing figure who towers over most of us, but soon you see a warm personality, a listener, one with a thirst for knowledge.

Born in Guam, he grew up a "Navy brat" who traveled with his family to multiple duty stations, finally settling in Live Oak, Florida. Chris was always a

tinkerer who built his own bikes and later worked on cars.

He worked as an FDOT Co-op to help pay for college while attending the University of Florida in Gainesville to become a civil engineer.

There, he fell in love with transportation and more specifically, traffic operations.

In his words, "That was my favorite part of transportation, and I liked it because you get to solve problems and

you see the end result of what you do – the instant gratification."

I caught up with Chris on February 15 and we had a conversation.

**JH:** Chris, before you became a champion of bike/ped safety, what is the project that you were most proud of?

**CLD:** Well, I think it has to be something totally outside of traffic engineering. When I first moved to Jacksonville, they gave me the Mayport Ferry project to run. I was like an administrator, I was

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## FDOT engineer Chris LeDew has a pas

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the project manager for construction of the current ferry boat—also site improvements, you know, new fueling facilities, slip walls (the docks where the ferry comes in) and then transition of all the employees to the city of Jacksonville. So that was about three years.

**JH:** That ferry is an important link for cyclists, who would have to detour 35 miles if it weren't in existence. How did that project turn out?

**CLD:** I'm proud of it because, when we turned it over to the city and—and their contractor—there was no hiccup in service. From the public standpoint, it was seamless. So that was a big project, outside of the box for me, and I got to learn a lot about diesel engines, Coast Guard regulations and things like that.

**JH:** That's an impressive picture of sharrows on St. Augustine's Bridge of Lions. Why did you use them?

**CLD:** Well, the Bridge of Lions is a state road, under DOT's domain. It started by requests from the public and one that stands out is FBA's George Martin. He's a great resource, taught me a lot, so when I saw his letter, I researched the engineering manuals and some sharrow articles. I found that sometimes you can-

not share the road side by side. It's safer for the cyclist to take the lane and slow the motorists down. The Bridge of Lions has longitudinal joints on the deck near the road edge, dangerous to cyclists. It's also a short distance, and the speeds on that bridge are already very low so the speed differential between motorists and cyclists is relatively small. Cyclists really don't have any other choice but to go across that bridge and there's no alternate route nearby.

**JH:** What's the line you have to walk?

**CLD:** That key point, that you're obstructing traffic—knowingly—is something that we're a little bit nervous about, especially when introducing a new concept to the public.

We worry about negative backlash. Sharrows are optional features and by introducing them slowly at choke points that are "most deserving," we hope that the public will see them used properly, they can be a valuable tool. The Bridge of Lions was "most deserving."

**JH:** So, when the state has a highway that goes through a city, such as the bridge of Lions, how do you coordinate with the locals on a project like this?

To provide more options for cyclists, FDOT replaced the "walk your bike" sign with "bicycles may use full lane" and "bicycles yield to peds" (plus the sharrows). That let cyclists—and law enforcement—know there are alternative acceptable ways to cross the Bridge of Lions.



**CLD:** We did coordinate with the city—it's a courtesy. That facility is owned by the DOT. We're responsible for the traffic operations, pavement markings, signing and maintenance of that bridge.

However, whenever we implement something new to an area, the public expects that maybe you're going to do this everywhere. The public wants to know, "Well, why did you do this?" And it's always good to work with the local governments, give them a heads up, share with them your information, your studies, so that they can answer those questions. And just to make sure that it jives or it goes along with their goals.

So, how did we coordinate with the city? I'm not sure if we had meetings, but we definitely did email back and forth with their public works people to let them know that this is what we were planning on doing, and also there was the law enforcement component of this.

The situation was kind of unique. St. Augustine has a local ordinance that says no bicycle riding on sidewalks. Now if you dig down into the finer points of the law, that ordinance does not apply to state roads.

That's a finer point that a lot of people in the public just don't realize. The only restriction to cyclists on a sidewalk is that you must yield to pedestrians. There had actually been signs placed on the Bridge of Lions sidewalks that said, "Walk your bike across." So we had to work on that expectation.

Basically, we spoke with law enforcement and let them know, "Hey, not only are we taking down that sign, but we're putting up a sign that promotes riding your bike on the sidewalk." It says, "Bicycles yield to pedestrians," and that's for the sidewalk.

And, "Bicycles may use full lane," and that's for the roadway to reinforce the

sharrows. So we're trying to provide options for various types of riders.

In fairness to St. Augustine, it's a very historic city. A lot of granite curbs, they don't have curb cut ramps everywhere, because of the historic nature. So, it's completely understandable that they don't allow bikes on the sidewalks. So you know, that's not a problem there.

**JH:** What about Jacksonville projects?

**CLD:** We launched the concept of inter-connecting bicycle facilities, starting at the most deserving location in Jacksonville, which, I think, is the Acosta Bridge because there are only two ways, two bridges, you can use to cross the St. Johns River in Jacksonville, the best being the Acosta Bridge. It has a nice wide paved shoulder, which we're going to convert to a bike lane as soon as we can get the bridge grates replaced with bicycle-friendly grates.

That left one chokepoint to get to Riverside, a 1,000' section of Riverside Avenue. We used sharrows there, which then opens up to a grid of streets that is the Riverside area, which was built before World War II, so it's on a walkable scale, lots of alternative paths that bicyclists can take.

So, we're working to link into that bicycle friendly area to the river walk (multi-use path), which takes you to the Acosta Bridge, over the river, which, then, takes you to a future shared bus/bike lane, which connects you up to another bike lane.

So it's all about interconnection...

*Continued...*

— Look for the rest of Jeff Hohlstein's interview with Chris LeDew in the Summer 2013 issue of the FBA Messenger.