

Making connections for equity in transportation

By: Tim O'Brien

Left in the dust used to mean something more exciting. Now it just means wondering what to do with that old mountain bike in the garage. Well in today's day and age, one man's former hobby could mean another man's future survival. Bike Athens, a non-profit bike shop off of W Broad St, takes in donated bikes from the community and repurposes them for Athens' homeless individuals.



*Tents and bikes at Athens Alliance Coalition's First Step encampment on Thursday, February 9th.
(Photo/Tim O'Brien)*

The topic of homelessness and unemployment in Athens is a common part of the conversation at City Hall. Athens has seen its highest record of homelessness in 5 years and the landscape is changing daily.

Many individuals may have a particular encampment in mind when they think of the houseless in their community, but many of these encampments—clusters of tents and tarps tucked away in the woods—particularly the ones on CSX property, have been torn down and their tenants have relocated to a more robust encampment down Barber Street.

On the grounds of the vacant North Athens Elementary School building, the Athens Alliance Coalition, has formed an alternative housing program for the homeless. First Step, a low-barrier completion program for unsheltered individuals, opened in March 2022 after being voted on by City Hall in a 6-5 vote split by Mayor Girtz. The camp, which is nearly the only of its kind in the city, is free to stay at and operates for the purpose of helping people “to be able to get back into society by assisting them with resources to help them transition out”.

Treshant Smith, project director at First Step, says there is a common misconception about people who are homeless: that they have no income. “Roughly 94% of everyone that's here has some form of income, they just cannot afford the high cost of rent, or paying their utilities and buying groceries,” says Smith, “They need all those things that come along with living.”

First Step strives to fill those daily needs by providing a place to stay, two hot meals a day, and a sense of community. Taking a tour through the camp one will find a general outdoor area, an indoor food hall, recreational rooms, a field of family-size tents, and a bike rack.

One of the caveats of the First Step encampment, located near the loop, is its distanced location from the downtown area and the usual stomping grounds of its residents. Barber Street, the road off which the site is located, is the main access to downtown, but the road has little to no biking/pedestrian resources, something that many movers in the community plan to change.

Daniel Sizemore, the Bike Pedestrian and Safety Coordinator for Athens Clarke County, has been advocating for bike lanes on Barber Street since 2020, when the project was first proposed as a part of the Athens in Motion Plan.

“When you look at Barber Street, and you think about the demographics, that immediate area, right there near Prince, those aren't the people we're connecting, the connection goes out, and then it brings people in,” said Sizemore.

According to GDOT data obtained by Sizemore, the estimated count of biking trips made in Athens in a single day is 7,800, nearly half of which are work trips. Furthermore, 31.2% of bike trips are made by someone in the \$0-\$15,000 household income range, and 29.7% of bike trips are made by riders with no household vehicles.

On top of that, 24.7% of the population and 36.8% of cyclists are Black. When Lauren Blais, the Commission Chair, shared at a meeting that most bikers in Athens are not White, she was scoffed at.

According to Sizemore there is a common assumption that cyclists are rich white people on \$10,000 bikes. “The people that we don't see are the people who aren't biking, because why would they get a bike if they can't safely bike, those are the people who will see a connected network that's protected and safe, and start biking,” said Sizemore.

The movement of homeless individuals is something that isn't often understood. It may be known where they house down for the night, but it is not always known how they get there. For those who were vacated from the encampment near the CSX railroad—formerly known as “Cooterville”—moving to First Step was a step up, but it was also a step away.

Smith says that most of the residents at First Step have to use the bus. If Barber Street had bike lanes, perhaps things would be different. “There are some that come in that don't have a bike and they don't know how to go about getting a bike,” said Smith, “If they could possibly get someone to sponsor bikes for them, or donate bikes or something like that, then I believe that we probably have more but it's just the situation at this time.”



Left: Bikes on the bike rack at First Step on Thursday, February 9th. Right: Tents on the field at the North Athens Elementary School where First Step operates on Thursday, February 9th. (Photos/Tim O'Brien)

Through places like First Step and its partners like the Sparrow's Nest and Advantage Behavioral Health, homeless individuals can access and communicate with social workers that can apply for a bike to be donated by Bike Athens.

“Usually, I'm looking for something that's going to be reliable, easy to work on, something that's going to be good transportation for somebody,” said Scott Long, Bikes Athens' Executive Director. “These are bikes that are going to be going off to encampments that are in the woods, people hopping on off curbs, sidewalks, all that other stuff, I'd like them to have a rigid frame, mountain bike, so that they can get around easy.”

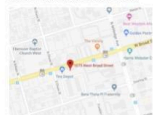
Partner Social Service Agencies

Sparrow's Nest
745 Prince Ave.
706.549.6693
Advantage Behavioral Health
250 North Ave.
706.227.5321
240 Mitchell Bridge Rd.
706.389.2789
Salvation Army
484 Hawthorne Ave.
706.543.5350
Action Ministries
465 N Lumpkin St.
706.353.6647
Bigger Vision of Athens
95 North Ave.
706.340.6062
Athens Area Homeless Shelter
620 Barber St.
706.354.0423
Live Forward (formerly AIDS Athens)
240 North Ave.
706.549.3730
Project Safe
706.549.0922

Our Mission

BikeAthens is a local non-profit that works to build equity in transportation through service, advocacy, and education. We repair bikes for those who need affordable transportation to work, school, or services. We advocate for a safe and connected city to ride in, and we teach safe cycling practices to people of all ages. We believe in the slogan, "The Bike is the Answer." For many it is a critical component of upward social and economic mobility.

Shop Phone: 706.249.9550
Address: 1075 W. Broad Street, Athens
GA 30606, across from the Varsity



Non-profit Status
The Athens-Clerks Safe Cycling Association, Inc. (BikeAthens) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation registered with the Secretary of State of Georgia. All donations are tax deductible.

BikeAthens Bike Recycling Program



We refurbish donated bikes to give to Athenians who need affordable transportation

In 2018, the BikeAthens Bike Recycling Program refurbished and donated 190 bikes to kids and adults in the Athens area.

These bikes are worked on by staff and volunteer mechanics. All bikes undergo an extensive inspection and repair process to ensure the safety of the rider. Worn parts are replaced and every bike leaves our shop in proper working order. We include a helmet, lights, and a lock with each bike that we donate. We recommend that everyone buy the best lock they can afford and lock up their bike every time.



How Do I Get A Bike?

Step 1
Contact one of our partner social service organizations. You may already be getting services from one of them. See the list on the back of this brochure.

Step 2
Ask them to email a bike request referral to shop@bikeathens.org. Make sure they include your height and weight so we can get you the correct size bike.

Step 3
Once BikeAthens receives that referral, it will go on our request board. You will get a bike after your name gets to the top of the list and our mechanics have completed work on your bike.

Step 4
The referring organization will contact you when the bike is ready and how you can pick up the bike. If you have not heard anything in a month, contact the social service organization.

FAQ

How long will it take to get my bike?
It usually takes 4-6 weeks until a bike is ready for you. It depends on our inventory and how many requests we are working on.

What if my bike has a problem after I get it?

If you have a BikeAthens bike with our yellow sticker we will do the maintenance for free for the life of the bike. Contact us or bring it by the shop.

Can I get a free bike if I walk into the shop and ask for one?

No. Due to limited resources of time and parts, we only donate bikes to individuals through our service partners. They are best equipped to determine who truly needs a free bike to get to work and for daily living.

I have a bike, but it's not working. Will you fix it for me instead of donating one to me?

We offer sliding scale repairs for individuals that need their bikes to get around town. Contact us and we can evaluate your bike and what you can afford. We may be able to offer low cost repairs or even do the repair for free.

We also sell affordable refurbished bikes to cover costs.

The informational brochure handed out at Bike Athens to individuals in search of free bikes. (Courtesy/Elise Stangle, Library Social Worker)

“A lot of situations change. For a lot of people,” said Long. “It might just be something that someone is able to use for six months and get a great benefit out of it.”

In a note received by Long, one recipient of a bike wrote that “with a bike it will help me even more on many different levels, from work, going to the store, to the doctors and much more”.

Beyond a warm place to stay at night, access to a bike and a safe biking infrastructure is the second step that a homeless individual needs to move forward.

“Equity isn't necessarily about equal representation,” said Sizemore. “It's about identifying who is either disenfranchised or doesn't have the support historically, and making things more accessible for them so that you can get that extra boost to try to move economically.”

With a successfully carried out Barber Street project paired with a bike from Bike Athens, the people at First Step will have the opportunity to progress in their life and make connections that benefit a community.

“If First Step gets funding or we're able to do a public-private partnership and continue to have that school serve as a location, then the Barber Street project does go directly by there and could be a big help,” said Blais.

When it comes to access to equitable transportation, getting bikes to those in need, and providing safe biking infrastructure, it's all about making connections.