

The Kinder, Gentler **Tour de `Burgh** Bicycling Loop

Where This Map Came From . . .

OK, I'm a total fraidy-cat on a bicycle. (What are those people doing biking on the busy stretches of shoulder-less Penn Avenue in Point Breeze? Haven't they heard of teenage texters?) And I'm not a young kid anymore, so flat is good . . . very good. Where does that leave me in hopelessly hilly Pittsburgh?

Yes, you can tool around in circles in your own little neighborhood, if you happen to live on the flats somewhere. But biking is meant for getting going on a good stretch of road or trail. Now Pittsburgh is close to being the national leader in river and rail trail development, and I heartily applaud that. But like going to a state park, for me those trails are a weekend special event, something I would need to commute to by car. No, no, no – give me biking that starts from my front door. Give me everyday biking where street-life is happening and smoothie breaks are never far away . . . just as long as there is a huge amount of space between me and the nearest car, that is.

Am I asking for the impossible in Pittsburgh? (To see my complete list of Pittsburgh impossible wishes, check out my "Life with a Lot Less Car In It" that ran in the Post-Gazette: <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/10122/1054515-109.stm>)

THE MAGIC LOOP

Twenty years ago, I and local mega-cyclist Danny Chew put together a bike map for the City. It had lots of useful, readable information on it. But I learned to hate bicycle maps (I have a big collection in the office) – even mine. Why? They take too much work to read and figure out. The masses of bike route squiggles might as well be a pile of spaghetti for how daunting they can be to decipher. Moreover, the familiar structure of highway arteries and neighborhoods can become unrecognizable under the weight of all those lines.

Then a few years ago I had a brainstorm: you don't need all those lines. Within neighborhoods, you can just bike around the local streets, you don't need to consult a 4-foot by 3-foot map for that. What you do need are the routes that are the bridges from one "island" of kinder, gentler biking to another.

What I wished for as we started developing this map, then, was a simple-to-follow, cycling-friendly route system that would bridge most of the East End Neighborhoods, and that might even permit easy connections to the trail system to Downtown, the North Side and the South Side. Identified streets had to be not-busy, or if moderately busy, with ample shoulder area (or dedicated lane) for bikes. If a route had to cross a busy artery, I wanted there to be a signal or a four-way stop. If a hill was involved, the route should be the gentlest of available options. Finally, it all had to fit on one 8 ½ x 11 and still be easy to comprehend in a few seconds break from cycling.

A few years ago, I would not have even contemplated developing such a map because of the number of missing links between the "islands." However, one big missing link was solved with the introduction of the bike lanes on the fast stretch of Forbes Ave along Frick Park (first proposed by my traffic engineer friend, Darryl Phillips, many many years ago). But another missing link seemed intractable, and that was getting into Shadyside from Beechwood Blvd. at Mellon Park without using the scary-busy stretch of Fifth Ave. to the left or Penn Ave. to the right. Shadyside appeared to be super-protected in that direction by the walls of the Ellis School, Schenley High School (formerly

Reizenstein) and the "Village of Shadyside" development. Then something exciting happened. Our resident "category 2" bicycle racer, Jeff Guy, found a nice big opening in the walls. It's a short grassy right of way that allows you to cut through the north-of-Fifth part of Mellon Park and get right into the back streets of Shadyside. You also can get to it via Putman Street at the new signal at Bakery Square. What a great discovery for the map (though to my chagrin, I then noticed Danny had mapped it out on our old City bike map – it only took 20 years for the link's significance to hit me!).

What came out of all this is a huge loop that is almost magical for how kind and gentle a ride it affords in the middle of the busy East End.

A QUICK GEOGRAPHY LESSON

There is a way to avoid hills completely – stick to the "great plain" of Oakland to Shadyside to Point Breeze and Regent Square (the upper half of the loop). Also, the branch up to Highland Park involves the gentlest of elevation rises – hardly noticeable. There are two sets of elevation changes you should know about. Mt. Squirrel (Squirrel Hill) rises up in all directions from the "great plain," but the routes we have indicated are all pretty gentle climbs. And then there is the drop down on all sides from the "great plain" to the rivers. Gentle, non-busy climbs back up from the river level are rare. Stick to the plains at first, and then build up to conquering Mt. Squirrel. Someday, you may even dare biking to the river trails unafraid of the climb back up.

FURTHER READING

Tom at Golden Triangle Bike Rental deserves a lot of credit: he commissioned a very readable City river trail map, obviously designed by people who really wanted novice cyclists to "get it." His main location is behind the PNC First Side Center next to the First Side Garage – just a hundred yards or so down the Eliza Furnace trail from its start at the Grant St. and Parkway corner of that Center. You can download the map at: www.bikepittsburgh.com

And bless those Friends of the Riverfront – their latest "Three Rivers Heritage Trail" map includes quite readable (i.e., not spaghetti-like) bicycle routes (though some of them are clearly for the spandex-wearing crowd). And thank you: they have a great detail map of the tricky connection to the Eliza Furnace Trail near Greenfield Ave (like we have in our Schenley Park map). You can download it at: www.friendsoftheriverfront.org/files/heritage_trail.html

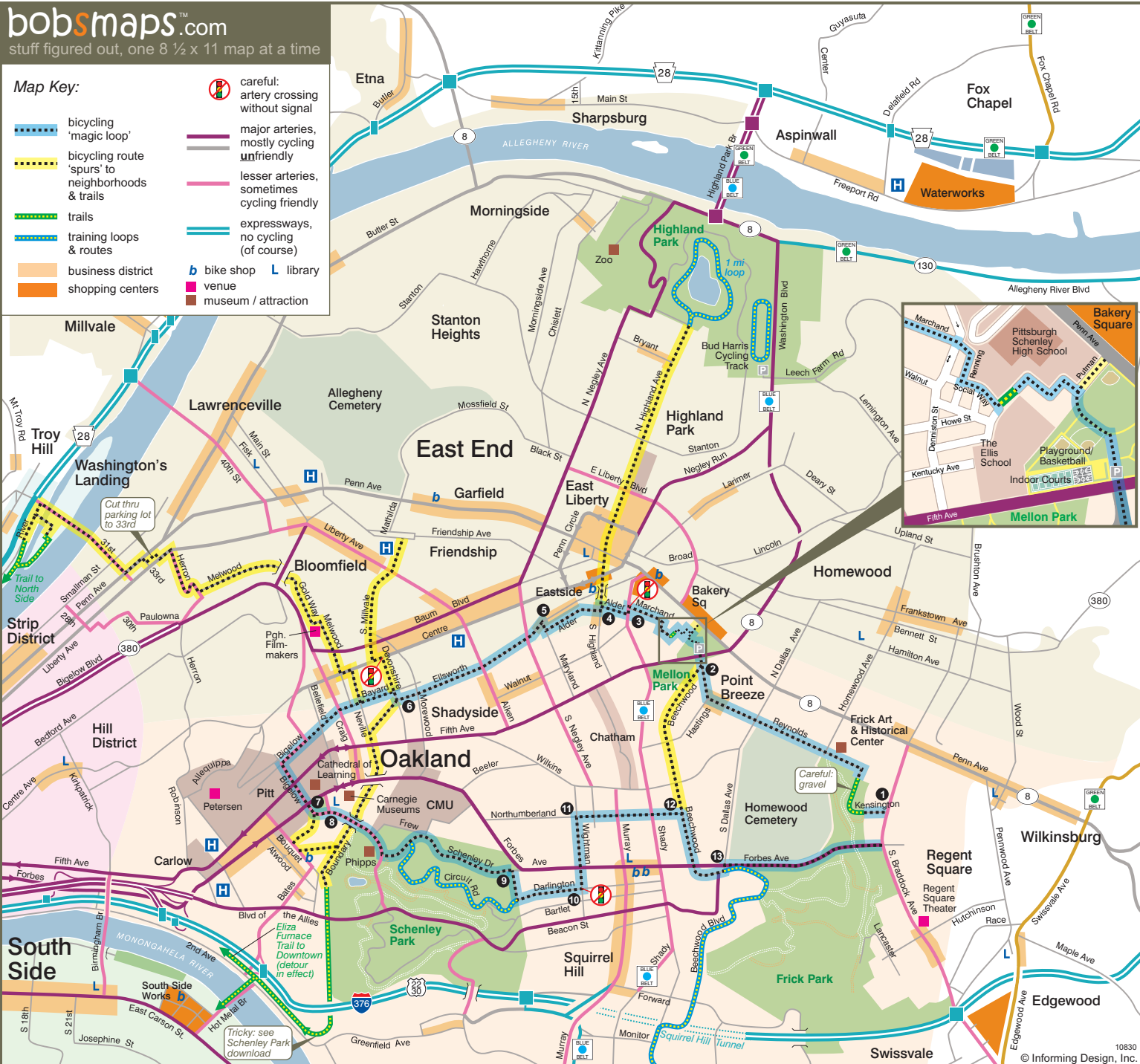


CAVEAT:

Even though we tried our best to pick out the kindest, gentlest routes, conditions can change quickly (and map-makers can make mistakes), so always use your own good judgment as you ride. Always bicycle defensively and obey traffic signs & signals.

Map Key:

- bicycling 'magic loop'
- bicycling route 'spurs' to neighborhoods & trails
- trails
- training loops & routes
- business district
- shopping centers
- careful: artery crossing without signal
- major arteries, mostly cycling unfriendly
- lesser arteries, sometimes cycling friendly
- expressways, no cycling (of course)
- bike shop
- library
- venue
- museum / attraction



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Upper Half of the Blue Loop, Counter-Clockwise:

- 1** Little Kensington Street ends at a trail that bends around to meet cycling-friendly Reynolds. SMOOTHIE BREAK: Pt. Breeze Business District
- 2** Reynolds merges into Beechwood Blvd., go across Fifth at the signal & continue to the end of the parking lot. Follow the sidewalk to the left to the road in front of the Army Reserve Building. Zigzag back to the left and voila: the few yards of grassy right of way that is the "secret passage" into Shadyside! Follow the alleys that hug the "borderland" walls until you hit Marchand St. (see inset above).
- 3** Continue on Marchand. At Shady Ave., make a left and then a quick right onto Alder. There's no signal to protect you there, but you could walk the short way to the crosswalk at Alder.
- 4** When Alder hits Highland, you go left at the signal & then immediately right to stay on Alder. SMOOTHIE BREAK: OH YEAH café, S Highland

- 5** Alder parallels the Ellsworth Ave. restaurant and gallery row. Make a right at Maryland and then a left on Ellsworth and continue riding the length of Shadyside. (Chic Walnut St. Business District is just a couple blocks to your left.)
- 6** Turn right at Devonshire and then left on Bayard. This will take you into Central Oakland – Bayard becomes Bigelow. Just before Soldiers & Sailors Hall, Bigelow turns left and then runs past the Cathedral of Learning.
- 7** Across Forbes is the new ped-friendly Schenley Plaza: SMOOTHIE BREAK!

Lower Half of the Blue Loop, Counter-Clockwise

- 8** From the southeast corner of Schenley Plaza, take Schenley Drive across the Bridge. Just past Phipps Conservatory, bear left around the little traffic island to head up the hill towards Squirrel Hill. The road through the Golf Course is a little steep, but there are nice wide shoulders.
- 9** At the stop at the top of the hill, turn right on Darlington Rd. At the next stop, turn left to stay on Darlington.

- 10** At the second stop after that, you're at wide Wightman St. You need to turn left here without benefit of a signal. Traffic is often light, but if it is heavy, walk your bike across using the crosswalk.
- 11** Continue straight on Wightman past the signal at Forbes. At the second stop after that, make a right onto Northumberland. We're jogging your way around the busy-ness of Squirrel Hill (SMOOTHIE BREAK) to find the gentlest climbs with the safest artery crossings! Continue on Northumberland past signals at Murray & Shady.
- 12** At the signal at broad Beechwood Blvd., turn right and continue past the signal at Forbes and wind around through the trees to come to the left at Dallas (just beyond the right at the stop sign). Make the left and a few yards later you are back at Forbes at a signal.
- 13** Make a right on Forbes – there is no bike lane yet, so be a little careful for the 100 yards or so until the bike lane appears. As you approach the Bridge, the bike lane disappears again, so be careful here too. Braddock Ave. is busy, you might want to walk your bike to get back to Kensington to your left. SMOOTHIE BREAK: Forbes & Braddock