

All aboard the Cambridge ‘bike bus,’ where parents and kids find strength in numbers

Part parade, part political statement, groups of cycling elementary school students and their guardians are banding together en route to school. And they say they’re just getting started.

By [Spencer Buell](#) Globe Staff, Updated November 8, 2023, 12:49 p.m.

CAMBRIDGE — On a recent weekday morning, groups of giggling children sitting atop their bikes clustered together like a tiny colorful biker gang, rang their bells, and joked around as Pharrell Williams’ song “Happy” blared through a portable speaker.

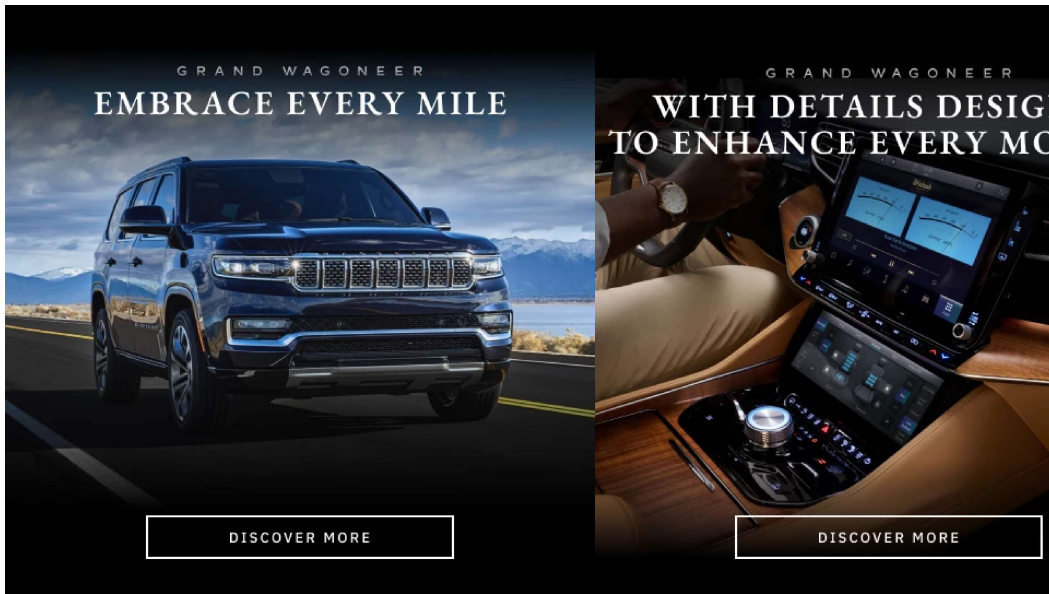
It was just past 8:15 a.m., and the seriousness of another school day would soon begin. But for this crowd of 75 parents and children (plus some local bike enthusiasts) gathered on a path near Russell Field, it felt more like it was time to party.

Some parents showed up on cargo bikes decked out with decorations, like a set of oversize googly eyes. One wandered through the crowd handing out munchkins.

After a quick speech about the rules of the road (rule number 3: “Have fun!”), they set off on a half-mile route to the Peabody Elementary School.

It was just another adventure for the neighborhood “bike bus,” which once per week rides to school in a formation the length of several school buses, hoping to find safety and visibility in numbers.

These types of groups have popped up in cities across the country over the past two years, as the movement for alternative transportation gains traction — and gives children an option they wouldn’t normally have on busy urban streets.



A "bike bus" in Cambridge helps children make the trek to Peabody Elementary School safely every Friday. For now, it's led by volunteers, but organizers want the city and school district to build on their success by taking it over. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

“For some kids, it’s the first time they’re riding their bikes in the road,” said Katherine Beaty, a Cambridge mother of three who organized the bike bus with other parents a year and a half ago. “So it’s this huge new world for them.”

Hers isn’t the only one that sets off once a week in the area. There are two others in Somerville, and at least one in Boston.

Beaty said she got the idea after hearing about similar bike buses in other cities and decided to start one of her own after getting to know other parents she saw riding bikes in the neighborhood.

Now she takes on the responsibility of planning the journey, sending out emails and a map of the side roads they will follow on the way to the school's parking lot.

But the operation isn't quite as simple as just pedaling off in the same direction.

As the group converged on a recent Friday, a handful of parent volunteers wearing reflective yellow jackets took up positions. One led from the front, and another kept an eye on the crowd from the back. A few others rode ahead and used their bikes to block traffic at intersections, a tactic cyclists call "corking."

Drivers who come across these civilian roadblocks are usually — but not always — level-headed about the disruption to their commute.

"There have been a few people that have been frustrated that we're stopping them and expressed anger out their windows," Beaty said. "But usually when people see the flood of children, they're understanding and smiling and waving."

Other parents, with smaller children strapped into cargo bikes or conventional bike seats, were peppered throughout the peloton of youngsters.

Beaty made her way through the mass of small cyclists on a bright-orange four-seater tandem bicycle, with one seat taken by a plastic skeleton with light-up eyeballs. Here and there, she popped up on the sidewalk and pedaled quickly to gain ground on the slow-moving group, keeping tabs on the operation.

All told, it takes about a half-dozen parents on high alert to ensure the bike bus goes smoothly.

Bike bus supporters point to the many benefits of getting to school this way. For one, biking keeps parents from having to drive each morning, idling in the school drop-off line and spewing emissions. Starting the day with an invigorating bike ride, they say, also gets children excited about school and ready to learn.

“It’s a lot easier to get him out of the house,” Dawn Fernandez said of her second-grader, who lights up when he knows it’s bike bus day. “When you’re [biking] with your parents, it’s not nearly as fun as when you’re with your classmates and your best friend.”

“It’s magic,” said Katie Byrne, who said her kindergartener gets so excited for bike bus day that they go out of their way to join the group every Friday, even though they’re close enough to walk.



Every Friday, students at the Peabody Elementary School can head to school on a "bike bus," where volunteers help ensure they're protected from cars. Organizer Katherine Beaty oversees the operation, and helps make it fun by decorating her bike and playing music through a portable speaker. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Cycling advocates, meanwhile, see bike buses as a way to promote biking as a viable alternative to driving, because they’re practically a rolling advertisement for the newest models of e-bikes and cargo bikes, and they make a highly visible case for better bike infrastructure to help protect children.

“I really think that these kids are doing the advocacy in a more powerful way than we can as adults,” Beaty said, “because you can just see the joy on their faces.”

So they've tried to get as many public officials as possible to witness it firsthand. In the run-up to this week's election, the Peabody group invited Cambridge City Council candidates to join them, and [several did](#). Some parents had notecards with the names of bike-friendly politicians pinned to their bikes. Even the school's principal, Abdel Sepulveda, bikes with them regularly.

Long-term, bike bus organizers say they want cities and school districts to take them over by planning, and paying for, the safety precautions required to pull the trips off.

That way, there could be bike buses more than just once a week, and access wouldn't be restricted to communities where parents can afford to devote part of their morning to volunteer.

There has been some progress elsewhere. A new law [signed by Oregon's governor this summer](#), known there as the "Bike Bus Bill," will reimburse schools for the cost of "alternative transportation," including bike buses.

It's a big step forward for the bike bus movement, said Sam Balto, a Portland, Ore., physical education teacher who leads what may be the country's largest and best-known bike bus, and who pushed for the bill.

"We need to understand that volunteerism is inequitable and unsustainable," Balto said. "We don't ask bus drivers to volunteer for the service they provide for communities."

Balto has roots in Boston. Before moving to Oregon, he launched a "[walking school bus](#)" in Roxbury, and was known here for a 2017 stunt in which he used [Tom Brady cutouts](#) to get drivers to slow down near school zones.

He has since become an unofficial spokesman for the bike bus movement. [Videos of the group at his school](#), which has had as many as 190 students participate, have racked up millions of views online. He's been featured on national news stories and late-night TV, and would-be organizers now routinely turn to him for help in getting bike buses going in their hometowns.

He’s pleased to see the idea taking off in Massachusetts and believes it’s only getting started.

“People really are moved by the idea of children having independence and freedom,” Balto said. “The joy that bikes create really touches something in us.”



The Peabody Elementary School "bike bus," in which parents and children ride together in a pack on Friday mornings, is led by volunteers. Long-term, they want it to be funded and planned by the city and school district. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Spencer Buell can be reached at spencer.buell@globe.com. Follow him [@SpencerBuell](#).

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