Bike lanes build on strengths

Pottstown has 70 miles of streets. Until recently, just one mile had bike lanes — High Street between Manatawny and Madison streets, dating back to 2003.

Now Pottstown has about six miles of painted bike lanes, forming a loop from downtown High Street east to Roland Street, north to Jackson Street, and west to the Pottstown YMCA.

It also has bike lanes on York and Johnson streets leading to and from Lincoln School, and “sharrows” — share the road bike markings — on other streets.

Not one Pottstown tax dollar was spent for this $2 million project, which also includes new sidewalks adjacent to 63 properties on High Street and Roland Street.

The Pottstown Area Health and Wellness Foundation provided $500,000 for the engineering. A federal “Transportation Alternatives” grant provided $1.3 million. The federal grant money was earmarked solely for alternatives to motor vehicles. Eleven projects in southeastern Pennsylvania were funded, and Pottstown won the largest share, even more than the city of Philadelphia.

Meanwhile, a new 1.5 mile separated bike lane along Industrial Highway, protected most of the way by a guard rail, is being constructed by Montgomery County as part of its trail system. It will formally open when Norfolk Southern completes some railroad crossing work east of Washington Street.

Big cities like New York, Chicago, Philadelphia and Washington have added hundreds of miles of bike lanes in recent years, as bike use skyrockets among millennials and plurals (Generation Z).

Pottstown is in the vanguard of small towns installing bike lanes, building on its system of interconnected streets that make walking and biking feasible alternatives to driving. Rather than clinging to its industrial past, which isn’t coming back, Pottstown needs to emphasize the healthy lifestyles that traditional towns can offer. The new bike lanes will attract the people Pottstown needs for a healthy future.

Commentary by Tom Hylton

ABOVE, a new bike lane is marked on the 1100 block of High Street with thermoplastic paint. Below, a student rides his bike on the new, two-way “cycle track” on Jackson Street, so called because it is separated from vehicle traffic by plastic delineators.