

I. INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2003, the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) Division of Bicycle and Pedestrian Transportation (DBPT) commissioned a study to examine the value of public investment in bicycle facilities. The northern Outer Banks region was selected for a case study because of existing high levels of bicycling activity in the area and the presence of an extensive system of special bicycle facilities funded and built by NCDOT and local municipal governments.

To determine the value of public investment in bicycle facilities in this area, an economic impact study was designed and conducted by the Institute for Transportation Research and Education (ITRE) at North Carolina State University. Information was gathered by researchers who surveyed bicyclists riding on the local bicycle facilities, including off-road and multi-use side paths and wide paved shoulders. Additional data were obtained from general tourists at three visitor centers in the region who completed self-administered surveys.

The basic intention of an economic impact study of this type is to examine the economic activity generated by visitors or tourists that are drawn to an area by a particular attraction or facility. When these tourists visit an area they spend money, and these expenditures benefit the local economy. A particular challenge in this case study was that tourists obviously come to the Outer Banks for a variety of reasons, most of which may have little to do with bicycling. Although they may do some bicycling while in the area, for most tourists this is not the primary reason for visiting the Outer Banks. Moreover, even if bicycling were an important factor in their decision to visit the area, was it the overall quality of bicycling in the area (e.g., the flat terrain, scenic views and generally temperate climate), or was it the availability of specific bicycling amenities such as wide paved shoulders or multi-use paths? If the bicycle facilities were a factor, to what extent did they play a role in visitors staying longer or returning for a subsequent visit?

The results of the study provide strong evidence that the economic impact of bicycling visitors to this area is significant. Key findings include:

- 680,000 visitors bicycle in the area annually, which represents 17% of all visitors to the area.
- Bicycling visitors to the area generate an economic impact of \$60 million annually.
- 1,400 jobs are supported annually.
- The quality of bicycling has a positive impact on survey respondents' vacation planning:
 - Forty-three percent reported that bicycling is an important factor in their decision to visit that area.
 - Fifty-three percent indicated that bicycling would strongly influence their decision to return to the area in the future.
 - Twelve percent reported staying three to four days longer to bicycle.

Most literature available on the economic impact of bicycling concentrates on specific attractions in which the bicycle facility itself is the primary reason for traveling to the area. No studies were found that focused on a system of bicycle facilities in which the subject of the study is just one of the many reasons people are attracted to the area. The findings in this study provide valuable evidence that the expenditure of public funds on bicycle facilities in coastal locations is a worthwhile investment.