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Google maps your way to the bicycle path

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Adding an often-requested feature to Google Maps, the Mountain View Internet giant is offering directions customized for bicyclists.

Google already provided directions for driving, walking or riding public transit, but pointing bicyclists on the best path wasn't as easy.

"We knew that when we added the feature, we wanted to do it right," product manager Shannon Guymon wrote on Google's official blog Wednesday.

"We wanted to include as much bike trail data as possible, provide efficient routes, allow riders to customize their trip, make use of bike lanes, calculate rider-friendly routes that avoid big hills and customize the look of the map for cycling to encourage folks to hop on their bikes," Guymon wrote.

Google worked with the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, which advocates for the creation of

biking and walking paths throughout the United States, to gather trail-map data.

"The demand for trail maps and information has never been higher, especially as more people recognize biking as a viable, inexpensive and healthy alternative to driving," Rails-to-Trails President Keith Laughlin said in a statement.

Google is highlighting bike paths, bike lanes and other recommended routes in shades of green — including popular routes in Silicon Valley such as the Los Gatos Creek and Stevens Creek trails.

The company's Seattle-based directions team has data on 12,000 miles of trails nationwide, plus information on bike routes in 150 cities.

According to a blog post by John Leen, a software engineer for Google in Seattle, the routing algorithm "will try to put you onto a trail as long as it won't take you totally out of your way."

Google also will try to steer bicyclists away from busy roads, Leen said. Bike directions can be found at <http://maps.google.com/biking>.

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