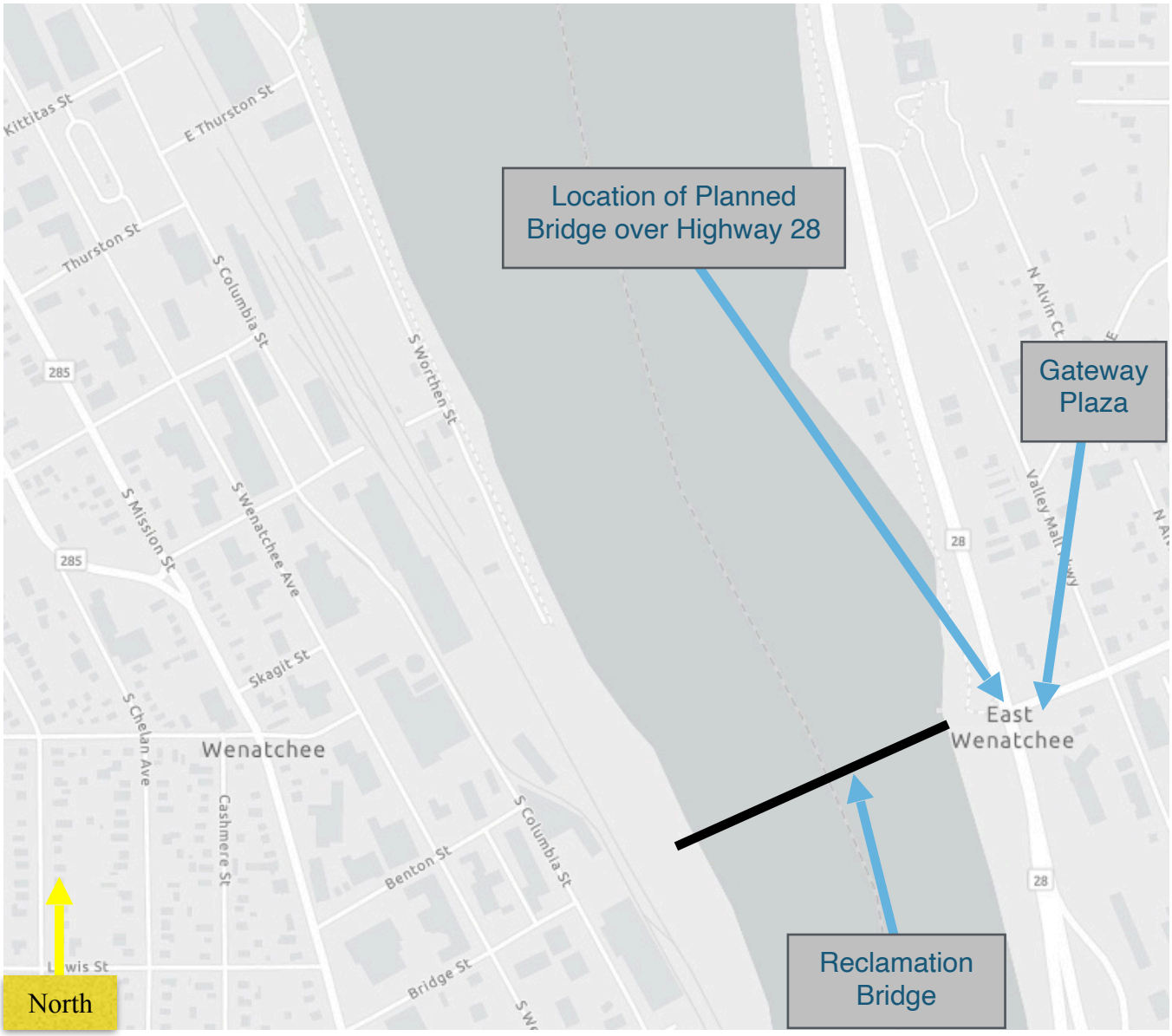
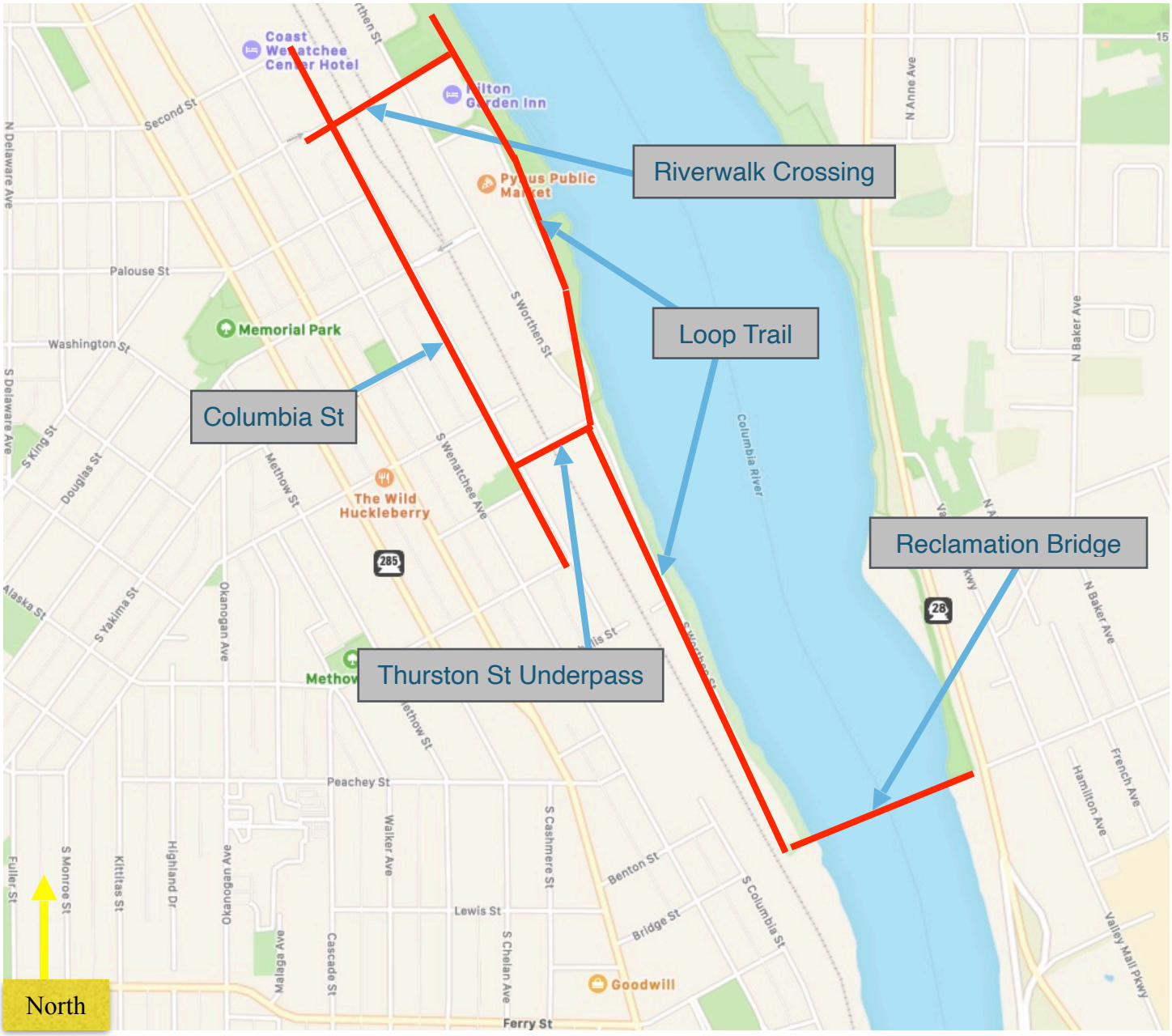
Access Downtown Wenatchee from East Wenatchee by Bicycle

by Charles Hickenbottom

Federal funding for a bicycle/pedestrian bridge (below) from Gateway Plaza in East Wenatchee over Highway 28 to the Loop Trail was announced in 2021. The announcement heralds a future where a bicyclist in East Wenatchee will have a much more convenient ride to downtown Wenatchee. The wait will be perhaps three to four years for the bridge to be constructed. Still, it's a ride that can already be done using a crosswalk across busy Highway 28. By careful route selection, a bicyclist can reach downtown Wenatchee without needing to ride Wenatchee Avenue, Chelan Avenue, or Mission Street, Wenatchee's busiest north-south streets.





Begin by crossing the Reclamation Bridge (aka Black Bridge or the Pedestrian Bridge), then head north on the Loop Trail (image above). If headed to Pybus Public Market, riding north on the Loop Trail is a direct and simple way to get there. If headed to downtown Wenatchee, however, there are two recommended options from the Loop Trail. First is to bicycle under the Burlington Northern railroad tracks on the Thurston Street Underpass. Bicyclists must "take the lane" for a few blocks, with no shoulder and no bike lane on Thurston St. A narrow sidewalk is an alternative if desired. The second option is to continue north past Pybus Market on the Loop Trail to access the Riverwalk Crossing over the railroad tracks. Either way will access Columbia St, which has a poor road surface but is still the most bicycle friendly north-south street in downtown Wenatchee. The alternative north-south routes (Wenatchee Ave, Mission St, Chelan Ave) have much faster traffic flows and will be of lesser interest to most bicyclists. Note: West-bound bicyclists using Riverwalk Crossing over the railroad tracks are forced to turn east onto First St for half a block to reach Columbia St.

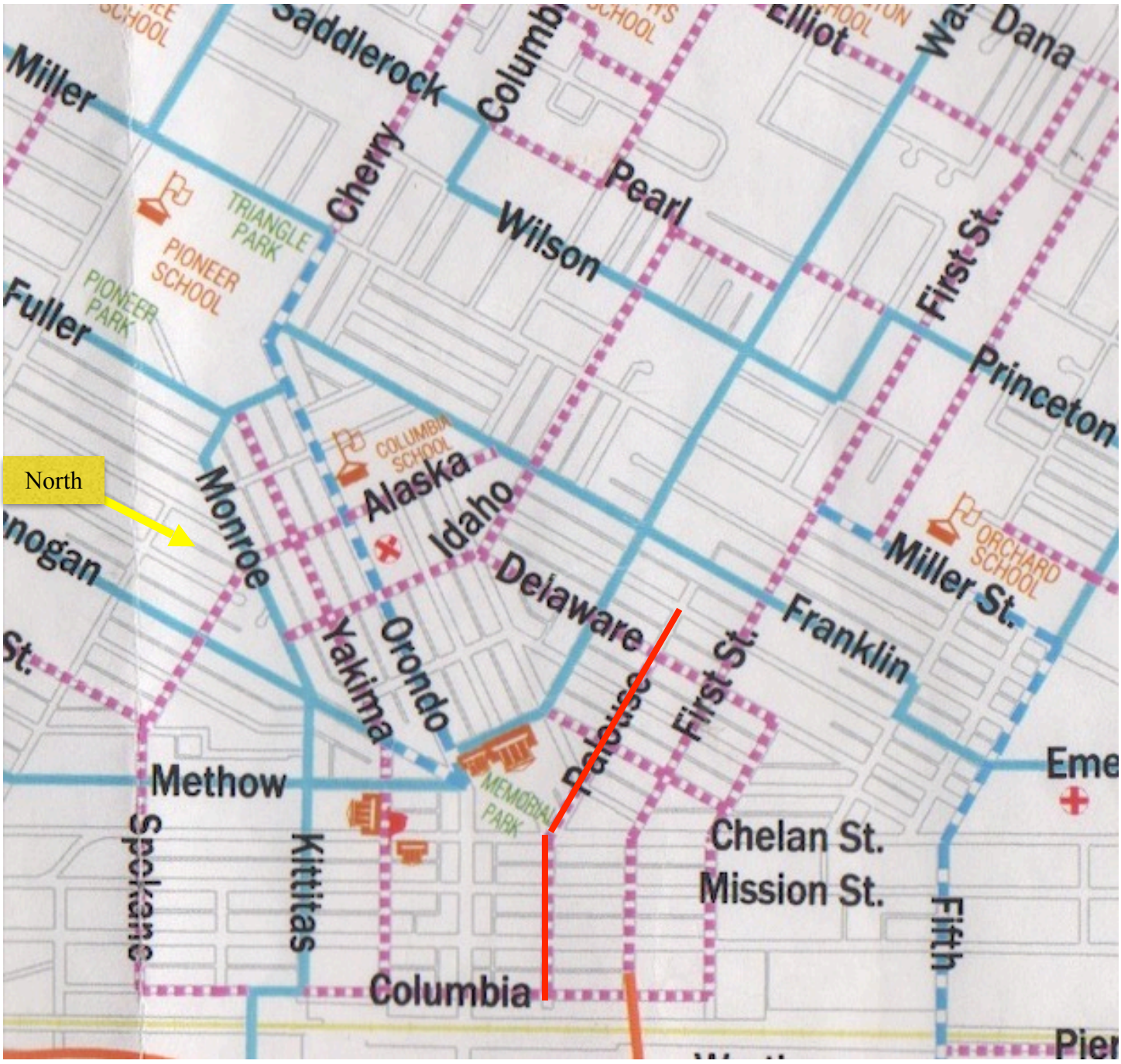
The image (above) shows six different streets that head west into downtown Wenatchee from Columbia St. In the order that these streets would be encountered if bicycling north on Columbia St from East Wenatchee: Kittitas St; Yakima St; Orondo Ave; Palouse St; First St; and Second St. Each of these streets have their own characteristics for bicycling, and each provides access to parts of downtown Wenatchee without having to use the north-south streets that are less bicycle friendly. Each of the six streets will be presented separately to showcase their utility to bicyclists.

The importance of Kittitas St was noted by the inaugural Greater Wenatchee Bicycle Advisory Board in 1997. Tasked by the city of Wenatchee to suggest making additions to the bicycle network, the committee coined the Kittitas-Fuller bike route (below in red). Bike route signs were added in 1998 to show the route between the Loop Trail and Central Washington Hospital (now, Confluence Health). Places along or near the route include Burlington Northern Train Station, Link Transit, Wenatchee City Hall, Wenatchee City Pool, Pioneer Park, and Pioneer Middle School. Numerous possible connections are possible. Examples are Alaska St leading to Columbia Elementary School, and Stevens St leading to Wenatchee High School. During periods of high traffic volumes, it takes patience for a bicyclist to wait for an opening to cross Chelan Ave. A controlled traffic signal at the intersection of Kittitas St and Chelan Ave is on the city's long-term shopping list.

Yakima St (above in red) also has much utility for a bicyclist. Especially during peak traffic hours, the controlled light at Yakima St and Chelan Ave helps a bicyclist get through. It is the easiest way to get to Wenatchee Valley Museum, Wenatchee Police Station, Centennial Park, and Wenatchee City Hall. One can bicycle into the rear parking lot of Plaza Superjet, where a quality bike rack is available. Especially bicycling uphill, Yakima St's lower volume of traffic may appeal to some bicyclists as an alternative to the bike lanes on nearby Orondo Ave. Convenient connections can be made at Idaho St to reach Columbia Valley Health Center, Alaska St to reach Columbia Elementary School, and Fuller St to reach bike lanes on Orondo Ave and Cherry St. Yakima St can also connect back to the Kittitas-Fuller bike route.

Orondo Ave (below in red) is locally famous to bicyclists since 1997, being the first street in Wenatchee to have bike lanes. Orondo Ave was convenient for city planners/engineers, because the road's generous width allowed bike lanes to be placed without eliminating any parking. Coming uphill from Columbia St, however, the bike lanes are not accessed until reaching Memorial Park. Inexperienced cyclists tend to avoid riding uphill on Orondo west of Columbia St. Still, if only heading uphill on Orondo Ave as far as Key Bank or McGlinn's, it's a reasonable compromise. Nearby Yakima St and Palouse St are more bicycle friendly if riding uphill from Columbia St. The utility value of Orondo Ave is that a bicyclist can use the bicycle lanes west of Chelan Ave all the way to Western Ave, a distance of nearly two miles.

Palouse St (below in red) is a hidden gem for bicycle use in downtown Wenatchee. The fact that westbound Palouse St ends at Emerson St makes it of little use for motorized vehicles, making this a relatively quiet street in the heart of downtown Wenatchee. If heading to the Wenatchee branch of North Central Washington Libraries, head west from Columbia St on Palouse St. At the light at Chelan Ave, veer slightly left off of Palouse St into the parking area that is shared by the library, Memorial Park, and Chelan County Courthouse. This would also be the street of choice to reach the Liberty Theater, close to Palouse St on Mission St.



Coming from East Wenatchee and planning to head west on First St, one can see the logic to skip Columbia St entirely. Riding farther north on the Loop Trail and using Riverwalk Crossing to reach First St (above in red), a bicyclist can avoid mixing with motorized traffic on the Thurston St Underpass and bumpy Columbia St. A bicyclist heading up Palouse St might even prefer the small amount of backtracking by using Riverwalk Crossing to reach downtown Wenatchee. Once off Riverwalk Crossing a contraflow bike lane is used to reach Wenatchee Ave. West of Wenatchee Ave, the buffered bike lanes between Wenatchee Ave and Chelan Ave provide comfort for a bicyclist. West of Chelan Ave and on to Miller St, a series of traffic circles built in 2020 reinforce to a motorist that slower speeds are intended. The result is a quality route for riding. A bicyclist can jog over a block at Dana St, then use Orchard St to reach the bike lanes on Western Ave.

Second St (below in red) only goes west as far as Delaware St. Access to Second St can be from Columbia St or from Riverwalk Crossing. For a bicyclist coming from East Wenatchee, Second St's primary utility is access to businesses on Second St and adjacent businesses on Wenatchee Ave, Mission St, and Chelan Ave. In addition, Second St provides access to nearby Pennsylvania Park.

While not exactly taking a bicyclist towards downtown Wenatchee, Spokane St (above in red) is another useful east-west street.. The best way to access this street is to take the Thurston St Underpass, then head south on Columbia St. A controlled intersection helps cross Wenatchee Ave. At the crossings of Mission St and Chelan Ave, recent improvements help with safety. Flashing lights can be activated at crosswalks. Use caution: motorized traffic is often moving faster than the speed limit. The steep hill between Wenatchee Ave and Mission St is daunting, but there's no harm in walking bikes uphill on the adjacent sidewalk. Spokane St works well for access to Pinnacles Prep School. Use of Methow St provides access to Lincoln Elementary School. The wide sidewalk on Wenatchee Ave makes it easy to bicycle to Stan's MerryMart.

When one considers the ease of parking a bicycle compared to parking an automobile, it makes a lot of sense to ride a bicycle into downtown Wenatchee. Coming from East Wenatchee, the time gained by driving a car is not significant. So why not get some exercise instead? I hope to see you out there.

Charles Hickenbottom is the author of Greater Wenatchee Bicycle Routes - A History Told Through Maps, Drawings, and Pictures. The book is available for purchase through the Wenatchee Valley Museum and can be checked out from North Central Washington Libraries. Hickenbottom has served for 25 years on local bicycle advisory boards and committees. For two decades he commuted by bicycle to Lewis & Clark Elementary School from his home near Chase Park. Most of his errands around town are done by bicycle. 5-30-2023.