

Bicyclists and Pedestrians Belong!

By Edward T. McMahon

Would you prefer to live in a town where you have to drive everywhere for everything or would you prefer to live in a town where you could walk, ride a bicycle, take public transportation, or drive to get where you want to go?

This question is at the heart of the debate over how our transportation funds will be spent over the next five years. It also suggests that local governments need to do more to include bicycle and pedestrian elements in their long-range transportation plans.

Transportation is about more than just roads. In many large European cities such as Copenhagen, Amsterdam, and Stuttgart, as many as 30% of all commuters reach their jobs by bicycle. Does this mean that the Germans, Danes, and Dutch don't like cars? Of course not, they love cars. They simply don't have to use them all the time, because they have far more transportation choice than we do. High speed trains, electric trolleys, and extensive networks of bikeways and footpaths are all common throughout European cities and towns.

Here in the U.S., every gallon of gasoline carries a federal excise tax of 18.3 cents. While 4.3 cents is dedicated to reducing the federal deficit, the other 14 cents goes to transportation spending.

Earlier this year, the U.S. Congress passed a \$220 billion reauthorization of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA). The new law preserves critical environmental programs such as those aimed at reducing air pollution and increasing funding for transportation enhancements, including bicycle and pedestrian facilities, rail-trails, and other non-motorized transportation alternatives. This means that federal money will continue to be available to state and local governments to better integrate walking and bicycling

facilities into local transportation plans. *[Editor's Note: For more on the ISTEA reauthorization, see page 10 of this issue].*

SOME STATE AND LOCAL OFFICIALS CONTINUE TO THINK THERE IS LITTLE PUBLIC DEMAND OR SUPPORT FOR BICYCLING AND PEDESTRIAN FACILITIES ... NOTHING COULD BE FURTHER FROM THE TRUTH.

Despite the increase in funding for non-motorized transportation facilities, some state and local officials continue to think there is little public demand or support for bicycling and pedestrian facilities as part of a multi-modal transportation system. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, a recent Lake Research Poll of registered voters showed that 64% support using federal transportation dollars to build bicycle trails, bike lanes, and sidewalks. Even a majority of those voters who do not ride bikes expressed support for federal funding of bicycle projects.

Davis, California, a city of 55,000 people near Sacramento, has 35 miles of bike lanes (about a third of the city's 107 mile street network) and another 36

miles of separate off-road bike paths. The city also requires employers to provide secure bicycle parking and shower facilities. As a result, more than 20% of all trips in the city are by bicycle. The Davis school district has no school buses and provides very little on-site parking for cars. Instead, each school provides secure, supervised bike racks. Thousands of students ride bikes or walks to school. One busy intersection alone sees a peak of 1,100 bicycles an hour.

While Davis is an exceptional example, a 1995 Louis Harris poll found that a majority of Americans would be willing to ride a bicycle to work "at least occasionally" if they could do so on a safe bicycle lane or designated off-road path. Even more remarkably, 13% of all Americans said they would be willing to ride a bicycle to work on a "regular basis" if they had the facilities to do so.

Visit any bicycle-friendly community and you will find large numbers of people traveling by bicycle. Eugene, Oregon; Tempe, Arizona; Seattle, Washington; Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts; Palo Alto, California; Gainesville, Florida; Boulder, Colorado; and Washington, DC, are just a few examples. Even cold weather communities like Madison, Wisconsin and Minneapolis, Minnesota have become bicycling meccas. Madison has more than 150 miles of bike trails and boasts of having more bicycles than cars.

Among big cities, Minneapolis has one of America's most comprehensive bicycle planning programs. When Mayor Sharon Sayles Belton was first elected, she announced eight goals for the city. One of those goals was to make Minneapolis "bicycle-friendly." In 1990, 1% of downtown commuters used bicycles, by 1998 it was almost 3%. The city's goal is 10%. Even in winter, over 2,000 cyclists a day commute to downtown, which eliminates enough cars to fill the



city's largest parking garage.

Minneapolis, long-known for its interconnected network of greenways and parkways, has also built the nation's first "bicycle freeway." The 3.5-mile Cedar Lake Trail allows commuters and recreational cyclists to travel to and from downtown Minneapolis on a pair of one-way 10-foot wide bicycle paths separated by a grassy median. The freeway even includes a separate parallel path for joggers and walkers.

ECONOMIC BENEFITS

Communities that build bike trails find that people start buying bicycles and related parts and accessories which in turn leads to jobs. In 1995 the bicycle industry produced and sold \$5.2 billion worth of bicycles in the U.S.

There are about 7,000 U.S. bicycle dealers, but these businesses are not evenly distributed throughout the country. They are disproportionately located in bicycle-friendly communities. For example, in 1996, the Denver metropolitan area (population of 2 million) had 149 dealers. By contrast, the Atlanta metro area of over 3 million people had only 28 bicycle dealers. The difference resulted from almost 200 miles of paved, off-road bike trails in the Denver area compared to less than 20 in the Atlanta metropolitan area.

There are other economic benefits as well — not the least of which is a reduction in municipal expenditures. Fewer

cars can translate into reduced road maintenance costs, smaller parking lots, and less money spent on expensive highway improvement projects. Also, bicycle paths and walking trails are among America's most popular recreational facilities.



Bicyclists can race trains in Minneapolis.

HEALTH AND PHYSICAL FITNESS BENEFITS

Coronary heart disease is America's leading cause of death and physical inactivity is the single greatest risk factor leading to coronary heart disease. As a result, exercise is especially important to improving public health. Bicycling and walking can help to fill America's physical inactivity void and make a major contribution to public health.

A recent publication of the U.S. Center for Disease Control, *Promoting Physical Activity Among Adults*, states that "the most effective activity regimes may be those that are modest in intensity, individualized and incorporated into daily activity." Bicycling or walking to work, school, shopping, or elsewhere as part of a regular day-to-day routine can be both a sustainable and time efficient exercise regimen. It also accomplishes two activities at once — travel and exercise.

ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS

Bicycling and walking also provide a variety of environmental benefits. Fewer trips by motor vehicles means less air pollution. It also means stores and businesses will need fewer parking spaces which in turn reduces stormwater runoff and non-point source pollution. The state of Minnesota estimates the public savings from reduced pollution, oil

import, and congestion costs at between 5 and 22 cents for every automobile mile displaced by bicycling or walking.

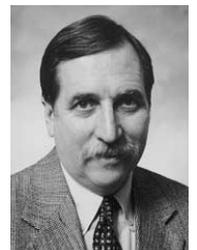
Although distance and increased time are frequently cited as reasons for not bicycling or walking, data from the U.S. Department of Transportation show that more than a quarter of all trips are one mile or less; almost half are three miles or less; and two-thirds are five miles or less. Moreover, 53% of all Americans live less than two miles from the closest public transportation route, making a multi-modal bicycle or walk-to transit trip an attractive possibility.

Once again, the biggest deterrent to increased non-motorized transportation is lack of facilities, not distance. Even in the sprawling Chicago metropolitan area, the U.S. Department of Transportation found that "census zones, where five linear trails exist averaged almost 16% of commuter trips by bicycle, compared to only 1% for the region as a whole."

I recognize that bicycle commuting is not feasible in some rural areas, and that many people, no matter where they live, will never seriously consider bicycling or walking as a transportation option. But given the choice — and the availability of facilities — millions of Americans in small towns, big cities, and suburbs, would choose to bike or walk more often.

What is unmistakable is that the economic, social, and environmental benefits of reducing our reliance on the automobile are immense. Planning commissioners need to seriously consider developing a bicycling and pedestrian plan as part of their overall transportation planning strategy. Clearly, bicyclists and pedestrians belong! ♦

Edward McMahon is a land use planner, attorney, and director of The Conservation Fund's "American Greenways Program." He is former president of Scenic America, a national non-profit organization devoted to protecting America's scenic landscapes. McMahon's column appears in each issue of the PCJ.



On-Line Comment

"Our society suffers from alienation, isolation of those unable to drive, and associated social pathologies. Many blighted neighborhoods or marginal ones would greatly benefit from increased 'people presence' as opposed to 'automobile presence' on their streets. Natural alliances between people wishing to have improved non-motorized transportation alternatives and residents wishing to free their neighborhoods from intrusive cut-through traffic and its ill effects seem possible."

— Reno J. Cecora, San Marcos, Texas