

Bicycling and the Importance of an Active, Engaged, Civic Culture:

The Citizen Bicyclist

Text of a Speech Presented at the Annual Bicycle Education Leaders
Conference on June 3, 2002 in Madison, Wisconsin
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The Citizen Bicyclist is someone who: Values community, values activism, values clean air, values clean water, and values healthy lifestyles.

You'll hear a lot of official braggadocio at this conference about the great bike trails & bike paths of this city [<http://www.ci.madison.wi.us/transp/bicycle.html>]. But I maintain that the only thing that makes this place bike-friendly is the people, the residents, the *citizen cyclists*. It is the *people* who carry through their environmental ideals, their community ideals and put them into practice by getting on a bike!

Very little of the bike orientation of this city can be attributed to official actions. Anything official you see in Madison that is bike-friendly only happened because Madison cyclists rose up and fought for it. It has generally meant going up against the entrenched auto-bureaucracy and political class and embarrassing them into action.

All of the bike paths & bike lanes you see here happened only because of a) strong, forceful—often obnoxious—and concerted political action and b) A culture that takes the bike as a normal way of getting around. The local highwaymen know that they have no choice but to accommodate us. Where they don't we're out there anyway. And you will see cyclists taking their place on the road throughout the vast majority of the city where no bike paths or lanes exist.

It takes ordinary cycling citizens stepping up to take a leadership role. It takes leaders who respect the work of other leaders. The people who have gotten the most done know when to either a) lead, b) follow, or c) get the hell out of the way.

In the early 90s when civic bike activism was really getting off the ground here, there was a hell of a lot of turf battling. Some individuals didn't know how to let other folks do their own thing for bikes. Some only wanted bike education; others just safe recreation; still others wanted to get in the faces of bureaucrats & politicians. We didn't know how to let other leaders lead in their own way. As you can imagine, a lot of people burned out quick. Finally, folks began to figure out that we just plain didn't have enough turf to fight over in the first place.

Bicycle Federation of Wisconsin's [<http://www.bfw.org>] executive director, Jeanne Hoffman, deserves a lot of credit for this sea-change in advocacy attitude. She knows how to lead, follow *and* get the hell out of the way. She doesn't get too awfully worked up when bike advocates say things she might not agree with; she's just happy to see cyclists speaking up.

So those of us who stuck it out sought to expand bicycling turf. We got involved way beyond our bicycle advocacy groups and started working with and within neighborhood associations, health groups, environmental groups child advocacy groups and others. We even started working on political campaigns to make bicycling a major part of candidates' platforms.

The Early Days of Madison Advocacy

When I first got here in 1991, there wasn't much bike activism, much less leadership. The activism of the 1970s had faded. Bike to work celebrations [<http://www.btw.org/>] consisted of our much esteemed ped/bike coordinator holding a lonely vigil on the square on a gray rainy morning in May, begging cyclists to stop and take a bagel.

Then came the mega-threat to Madison cycling—the Monona Terrace Convention Center! The Monona Terrace convention center was planned without cyclist input (as per usual). Construction was going to cut off the most used commuter path in the state. The city's cyclists woke up. A new crop of leaders emerged. We led a coalition of hundreds; organized critical mass rides; protested on the steps of city hall. The vigorous protest forced the city to accommodate bikes through most of the construction.

But this was just the beginning. We realized that we had gone to sleep behind the handlebars; that we got behind the power curve politically; that we needed to get in on the decision-making *before* the decisions were made.

So we started attending boring meetings. We strategized amongst ourselves at advocacy meetings. We set up bike advocacy email lists [<http://danenet.danenet.org/bcp/online.html>] and a website [<http://danenet.wicip.org/bcp/>] for outreach, education and more strategizing.

And then we started showing up at boring city council meetings.

We ruffled the feathers of the entrenched automobile-oriented liberal political classes. But, as political naifs, we didn't realize that the decisions had already been made in advance at the various city commissions, committees and subcommittees.

So we deployed to the boring meetings [<http://www.ci.madison.wi.us/cc.html>] of the commissions, committees, and subcommittees. We started having minor successes here, but not as many as we had hoped. We found that there is yet another level with real power: THE NEIGHBORHOODS [<http://www.ci.madison.wi.us/neighborhoods/index.htm>].

A major characteristic of these older Great Lakes Cities is the strong attachment to older neighborhoods. There is a spirit of community cohesiveness. As they experience a revitalization, many of them are getting plenty tired of being the speedway for the anti-community long-distance commuter. We started getting some traction at the

neighborhood level by making common cause with our own neighborhoods on traffic issues.

As an example of the power of the neighborhood, this is my neighborhood plan [<http://www.ci.madison.wi.us/neighborhoods/concentplans.htm>] and you'll see that it is chock-full of good traffic calming and other ped/bike safety issues. It has the seal of approval of the entire neighborhood as well as every city committee, commission and even the city council. It is no coincidence that the ped/bike-friendly elements made it in here and that two leaders in the bicycle advocacy community were appointees on this committee (yours truly included). We have since used this document to great effect to push for more ped/bike-friendly development in our neighborhood.

The average non-cycling resident is gleeful at the prospect of slower speeds with traffic calming, increased speeding enforcement and road designs for slower speeds - all the stuff most cyclists are interested in. We found that our input is welcome when we work on boring neighborhood traffic committees. Several of us have gotten on the neighborhood council itself or just go to their meetings and speak up. The power of a neighborhood association is incredible. POLITICIANS LISTEN to Neighborhood Associations! That's when a lot of good things can come of it for bikes. One of the secrets is to talk about kid safety, not lycra-clad cyclist safety. People are very kid focused. And no one can say no to kid safety. But just between us, if things are safer for kids, they are safer for all of us.

The other secret is VOLUNTEER. DO THE HARD WORK! Organize the events, fundraise, keep membership databases, do the treasurer duties. People will be so appreciative and so eager to keep you on board for doing the grunt work that they'll be much more open to your ideas. A lot of enemies have become supporters because of the work I and other bike advocates have put into the organizing side of neighborhood associations.

Who are our real friends?

Whenever I come to regional or national conferences like this, I always hear about things happening for bikes in Madison because it is a "liberal" place. The reality is, we have found that the liberals in this town would rather patronize us than help us: "Your being too radical, tone it down, you'll never end the American love affair with the automobile" —all given in very fatherly tones as they vote down good bike stuff. I consider this entrenched, smug, liberal tyranny to be a major impediment to progress for biking and walking.

On the state level, the republicans have been our allies more often than the democrats (I'm not a republican by the way). Our republican governor, recognizing the value of bicycling to the state's economy, has repeatedly reinstated bike/ped money into budgets that the democrats had eviscerated. It was a conservative Republican assemblyman who wrote & sponsored the modernization of our state's bicycle traffic laws—laws that would make even John Forester [<http://www.johnforester.com/>] happy! We have a very republican Dane County Supervisor fighting for a bike path in her district; same story in

the city. Meanwhile, liberal democrats can't seem to focus on anything but raiding federal bike funds for more highway building or moronic, ineffective helmet laws. So I hope I've made the point that liberal places and liberalism are not the secrets to a bike happy place. Make your allies where you can; speak to whoever will listen. Get obnoxious if you have to.

Get Political!

Better yet, get political! Get rid of the old guard altogether by electing your own slate of pro-bike politicians!

We now have several out-of-the-closet bike-friendly city alders and county supervisors and a true friend in the County Exec's office. Many of us have worked on their campaigns with the explicit understanding that we are doing so because of their pro-bike positions. We have now gotten rid of a fair portion of the stodgy, liberal old-guard.

So you ask, what really does this political stuff have to do with bike education? Well, it is no coincidence that Dane County [<http://www.co.dane.wi.us/>]—led by a pro-bike executive [<http://www.co.dane.wi.us/exec/exechome.htm>] and several pro-bike county supervisors—now has a quarter million dollar county-wide bicycle education program [<http://www.bfw.org/bfw/safety.html>] based on Effective Cycling. The Bike Fed of Wisconsin [<http://www.bfw.org>] is now carrying it out. The Dane County program is likely to become a statewide, and even national model. Bike advocacy and bike education have gone to the next level, thanks to bicyclists getting involved in politics.

If you want bike education to be successful, GET POLITICAL!

The Threat: Engineers & Planners

I would submit that the biggest threat to bicycling is not politicians, but the planners, the engineers--the so-called experts--who haven't cracked a book in decades. Heaven for them is a cul-de-sac that leads to a fat 6-lane highway lined with strip malls.

But this week your official minders will make sure you see something different. You'll see only the window dressing worthy of a good Soviet tour--bike lanes, bike paths, bike racks. The reality for most cyclists in this city is: Most new areas of Madison are grossly under-served by even the basics of neighborhood connectivity. And I don't mean bike paths, I'm just talking neighborhood streets. Madison cyclists don't mind using the street. I'm also talking about the scale that Madison's 1950s-trained engineers foist upon us. To get anywhere you've got to take a 4-6 lane highway. It is daunting even *this* seasoned road warrior. Try it. Sneak away from your official minders, take a side trip out to any subdivision built in the last 15 years and you'll see the same tangle of inaccessible cul-de-sacs, schools surrounded by highways, far-flung office parks, and radical separation of uses you'll find anywhere else in this suburban nation. Dumb development is the order in all new development in this city. Don't let the official minders fool you.

The Take-Home Message:

Build a strong bike advocacy organization.

Work with fellow bike leaders, no matter how wacked-out, crazy or obnoxious.

Network outside of bike advocacy circles.

Go to boring transportation committee meetings.

Go to boring city council meetings.

Get involved in your neighborhood.

Speak up!

Get in their faces if you have to!

Get Political!

Fight on the beaches!

Fight in the hedgerows!

Fight in the alleyways!

Nevah Surrendah!