

Creating a bicycle and pedestrian culture

The Vermont Bicycle and Pedestrian Coalition was founded in 1993 to advocate for the needs of cyclists and walkers in Vermont. The coalition's vision is this: to help shape public attitudes and policies to create a statewide environment that promotes cycling and walking as safe and valued modes of transportation and recreation.

In essence, the coalition is trying to create a bicycle and walking culture in Vermont. Other countries have done it — in the Netherlands, 43 percent of all trips are by bicycle. In Japan, with a huge car culture, 25 percent of all trips in Tokyo are by bicycle. Look at the sea of bicycles in photographs of China. Believe it or not, 40 percent of all car trips in the United States are 2 miles or less, and 49 percent are less than 3 miles. What would it take to establish a strong culture of walking and cycling in Vermont?

Yes, a statewide organization can publicize events and programs and add weight to advocates' positions. There is strength in numbers. Studies in Sweden, Washington state and Orlando, Fla., have shown that as the numbers of cyclists on roads increases, the number of bicycle-automobile collisions actually decreases, the result, it is postulated, of increasing awareness on the part of drivers. The more people out there walking and riding, the safer all of us will be.

This is also a public health issue. After a 1985 study showed that 40 percent of adults were sedentary, health officials got on the stick to get the word out. Another survey in 1994 showed the number of sedentary adults to be 58 percent. We're not doing real well here, folks. One-fifth of all teen-agers and one-third of adults are overweight. Nationally, only 7.5 percent of people older than 18

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IT'S MY TURN

Perhaps it's as easy as saying, "If you build it, they will come." That has been the experience of Stowe and Burlington, their bike paths attracting thousands of walkers, cyclists and skaters. The Burlington path serves downtown, and people do use it for commuting. Federal funding for bicycle and pedestrian projects is on the rise.

Let's not focus only on facilities, though. A bicycle and walking culture requires education — of motorists and of cyclists and walkers. Safe practices are everyone's responsibility. What would the Vermont driver's manual look like if the state had a bicycle and pedestrian culture? What would be offered in schools? What events would communities hold

to promote safe cycling and walking?

A cycling and walking culture requires the political will that promotes it, occasionally above the demands of the motoring community. What legislation would help nonmotorized interests? How do we allocate public funds? People who oppose urban sprawl point to walking and cycling as cornerstones of a livable community. Who benefits directly in a state with an established bicycle and walking culture? Bike shops? For sure, the more riders, the more people want to become riders, the more business for local shops. Tour companies? Organizers of event rides? Yes, a network of safe and attractive bikeways and walkways attracts tourists to Vermont and participants in such events as the Tour de Cure or the multiple sclerosis rides. How about bike clubs and advocacy groups?

receive recommended levels of physical activity, defined as the equivalent of a brisk 30-minute walk most days. There are 69 million Americans with some form of cardiovascular disease of which 6 million have coronary artery disease accounting for 1.5 million heart attacks and 500,000 deaths a year. And the risk factor most important in these staggering numbers? Smoking? Obesity? It's physical inactivity.

In addition to heart disease, physical exercise has positive effects on diabetes, hypertension, stroke, osteoporosis, depression and arthritis.

Who else benefits in a bicycle and walking culture? What about those who don't own a car? How about current cyclists and walkers? Imagine being able to ride a bicycle across the state from Burlington to White River Junction on a network of safe, quiet roads and bike paths. Imagine being able to walk to work.

Marilyn Burrington, who lives in Charlotte and works in Burlington, could only imagine walking to work. Maybe she never even considered it. This year, the Champlain Flyer, the commuter train linking Charlotte to Burlington, began service. She took the train, and discovered the joy of walking the 20 minutes up the hill to her job at the University of Vermont in the morning and back down in the afternoon. What was a dreaded, stressful drive on crowded U.S. 7 has become a pleasant train ride and a healthy and relaxing walk she looks forward to every day.

She convinced her husband to leave the other car at home and join her. She has discovered what all of us who bicycle or walk already know. Yes, if you build it, they will come. But when they come, it will change their lives.

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