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WHEELS
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BIKE CULTURE IN CHICAGO, 2010



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BIKE CULTURE IN CHICAGO, 2010



SIXTY OR SO BICYCLISTS, REFLECTING all hues of the hipster-to-spandex rainbow, listen attentively to the short stocky man standing in the overgrown vacant lot on Chicago's West Side, as he reads from dozens of pages of laminated notes into a megaphone. Garfield Park is unfamiliar territory for the bicycle tourist, as the occasional incredulous local resident, seeking cooler confines on this smoking-hot summer day out on a porch, is happy to shout out. But Garfield Park is a marvel for historical preservation buffs, an outdoor museum of noteworthy structures and houses on the National Register of Historic Places. And that is what this ride is all about, an architectural tour of one of Chicago's neighborhoods, conceived, organized and led by Lee Diamond of Big Shoulders Realty. Diamond's been doing these rides for three years, nearly every month including winter, but this one is to be the last, at least in its current form. Not for lack of popularity, in fact; word has spread quickly about these tours and riders often surpass one hundred and major bicycling advocates like the Active Transportation Alliance have signed on this year as "sponsors." Diamond, who looks more like a thirtysomething rocker (which he is, playing in a post-punk band) than a slick, fast-talking real estate broker, started the tours to bring together his passions of biking and architectural history, with the hope that they'd also serve as good marketing channels for his business. Today, he announces that he's come to realize that putting in eighty hours a month and

tens of thousands of dollars for events that bring in no revenue, is not a sustainable long-term proposition. That's right, there has not been a charge to ride along with Lee on his rides, in spite of the extensive preparation and the in-depth nature (four hours plus) of each.

Diamond's passion, commitment and eventual dilemma are characteristic of the city's most ardent bicyclists. At its best, it's a small-town community, driven by an altruistic spirit of helping one another without regard to self-interest (several unplanned stops on these rides occurred when a rider picked up a flat tire on Chicago's sharp streets and someone changed it for them; another rider volunteered her home as a pit stop for dozens of strangers to refill water bottles). At its worst, it's a small-town community misunderstood and ignored by the big city it lives inside. The Big Shoulders ride was not the only two-wheeled adventure that day; the Tweed Ride was going on at the same time, and later that night, The Midnight Marauders would chase the sunrise on the city streets. Bicycling in Chicago is thriving. Yet with Big Shoulders rolling to, perhaps, its end (Diamond is looking for ways to continue these rides in a more financially sustainable manner, a commitment that seemed to grow more resolute as the day progressed), and Tour de Fat rolling its bicycle carnival into town for its annual visit, it seemed like a good time to take a look at the current state of bicycling in Chicago. (Brian Hieggelke)

SHIFTING INTO HIGH GEAR

When it comes to big plans for bicycling, City Hall is coasting

by John Greenfield

DON'T GET ME WRONG—Chicago's already a terrific place to ride a bicycle. It's flat, with a bike-friendly street grid and a scenic, 18.5-mile Lakefront Trail. Since the early nineties, the City of Chicago has spent \$100 million to push pedaling, striping over 110 miles of bike lanes, installing more than 12,000 bike-parking racks, and educating tens of thousands of people about safe cycling via Mayor Daley's Bicycling Ambassadors. Cyclists have access to buses and trains, we've got a fancy bike station in Millennium Park, and the list goes on.

But when *Newcity* asked me, a former Active Transportation Alliance staffer and consultant to the Chicago Department of Transportation's (CDOT) Bicycle Program, for my take on the current state of bike culture in Chicago, one word sprang to mind: stagnant.

On some levels things are going great. Since changing its name from the Chicagoland Bicycle Federation, Active Trans has been doing yeoman's work building a coalition of biking, walking and transit interests. This has helped double the organization's budget and staff size, increasing its clout to promote green, healthy travel.

We now have four community bike centers spread from Woodlawn to Rogers Park, most teaching bike handling and mechanical skills to inner-city youth and selling refurbished rides to residents for cheap, green transportation. Three of these co-ops have expanded to larger digs in the last year or so.

There are now three Euro-style bicycle shops selling stylish, practical city bikes and cargo cycles, plus a gaggle of other new stores serving the ever-expanding ranks of daily commuters. After all, CDOT says bike traffic has quadrupled on Milwaukee Avenue over the last six years.

But lately CDOT and other city agencies have been spinning their wheels when it comes to making bicycling safer, more convenient and fun through innovative bike facilities and programming. To paraphrase Daniel Burnham, they've been making little plans that have no magic to stir cyclists' blood.

I'm not the only one who thinks so. Executive Director Rob Sadowsky recently resigned from Active Trans to take the reigns of the Bicycle Transportation Alliance in bike-crazy Portland, Oregon. Since Active Trans gets much of its funding from consulting contracts with CDOT, the nonprofit tends to be muted in its criticism of City Hall. Freed from this constraint, Sadowsky fired a parting shot in a recent *Sun-Times* interview:

"Chicago was leading the way for a long while in cycling," Sadowsky said. "Things have been happening in other cities, like Minneapolis and New York, that really made strides we're not even coming close to. Part of that is a strong presence from the Department of Transportation's commissioner level and strong backing from the mayor. We're kind of lacking that in the city right now."

This current leadership vacuum was apparent at this year's lackluster Bike to Work Rally. Mayor Daley, who usually shows up to give an enthusiastic if somewhat cryptic speech at the annual rally, was conspicuous by his absence.

CDOT Commissioner Bobby Ware, subbing for the mayor, seemed to know little about his agency's bike projects. He spoke with his nose in his notes, referred to the City's Bike 2015 Plan blueprint for cycling as the "2010 Plan," and mangled the name of a Bicycle Program staffer who accepted an award on behalf of the program.

In fairness, Ware's only been on the job for a month. But the fact that CDOT has had five commissioners in six years, for reasons known only to Mayor Daley, has slowed the pace of bicycle planning. Each new commish has to be brought up to speed on cycling issues, and this wastes precious time.

Another speed bump to better bike facilities and events has been the city's reluctance to put some skin in the game. Daley, rumored to be a cyclist himself, is often cited as the U.S. mayor who is most outspoken in support of biking. And as a powerful politician, his lip service is in fact crucial for motivating bureaucrats to support bicycle projects.

But like our under-funded transit system, bicycling gets almost no money from the city budget. Virtually all of the cash CDOT spends on bike initiatives comes from federal and state funds, often through federal Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality grants which come

from a tax on gasoline.

This stinginess makes it harder to pull off bold schemes like the "ciclovía," an event that shuts down several miles of streets to cars, creating safe places to bike, walk and socialize. Active Trans first proposed bringing this Latin American concept to Chicago in the early 2000s, well before other U.S. cities were talking about it. But City Hall's insistence on a heavy police presence and reluctance to foot the bill delayed the program for years while Active Trans struggled to raise the necessary funds.

The ciclovía finally debuted in 2008 as "Sunday Parkways," with events on two different 3.5-mile courses on Sundays in the fall. In 2009 it was consolidated to one seven-mile summer Saturday event, called "Open Streets." After these modest successes, the program fizzled out due to the difficulty of funding it—there will be no major events in Chicago in 2010. Meanwhile, city-funded ciclovías have flourished in other cities. New York is staging three this year, Portland, Oregon is staging five, and San Francisco is staging nine.

Chicago used to be the poster child for big-city bike improvements. A few years ago, New York's Transportation Alternatives advocacy group liked to use the Second City's successes to shame the then-sluggish New York DOT into action. But things changed in 2007 when New York got a dynamic, bike-friendly new transportation commissioner, Janette Sadik-Khan. In recent years Chicago has fallen behind New York and many other cities in several aspects of promoting cycling.

Chicago has installed more bike racks than any other U.S. city. But last year the City began uprooting most of Chicago's parking meters to make way for pay-and-display units, eliminating tens of thousands of de facto bike-parking spots. Meanwhile, CDOT has not installed any new bike racks for months and will not be doing so anytime soon, due to installation contract delays.

On-street bike parking, where a single car parking space is filled with racks to accommodate a dozen cycles, reducing sidewalk clutter and advertising the space efficiency of bikes, is becoming commonplace in Portland, Oregon and San Francisco. Although Andersonville's Cheetah Gym, with the blessing of the local chamber of commerce, asked for on-street racks several years ago, CDOT passed on this opportunity, citing concerns about safety. Chicago still hasn't tried on-street bike parking.

Separated bikeways, where cyclists are protected from cars by a curb or other physical barrier, are widespread in Europe and are becoming more common in U.S. cities. New York's separated bike lane on Sixth Avenue, for example, has been a hugely popular experiment, but Chicago has yet to try this idea.

Automated bike rental has been commonplace in Europe for years. Paris' Velib system, with 20,000 bikes at rental kiosks all over town, is credited with doubling the modal share for cycling. Chicago has been talking about this idea for years and in 2007 Mayor Daley rode a Velib bike in Paris. But Washington D.C. beat us to the punch two years ago, Denver now has 500 automated rental bikes and Minneapolis will be getting 1,000 this summer. Chicago is finally piloting a

bike-share program this July, but once again we're thinking small, with only 100 bikes in six Loop locations.

But perhaps the most frustrating example of Chicago being the first to come up with a good idea for cycling but the last to implement it is the Bloomingdale Trail. As early as 1997, planners proposed turning the little-used Bloomingdale elevated rail line on the Near Northwest Side into a multi-use path, and the Chicago Plan Commission committed to the idea in 2004.

Although the rugged, now-abandoned rail bed is already getting plenty of illegal use from cyclists, joggers and squatters, the city seems to be dragging its heels on renovating the structure and opening it to the public. It's unlikely to open until the end of this decade. Meanwhile, New York's elegant High Line "vertical park," a similar project that wasn't officially proposed until 1999, debuted last year to huge acclaim—it's already had millions of visitors.

As a follower, not a leader, in all these different categories, it's no wonder Chicago dropped in Bicycling magazine's ranking of the best large U.S. cities for biking, from first place in 2001 to tenth place in 2010. It's not that things are bad here, it's just that more exciting stuff is happening more quickly elsewhere.

Active Trans will be hiring a new director soon, and it will be interesting to see if this person can light a fire under CDOT and other departments to make some of the above projects happen sooner than later. But again, Active Trans can only push so hard, because the advocacy group depends on the city for consulting dollars.

Unlike in liberal, temperate West Coast cities where bicycling has long been popular and politicians have responded to demands from the public for better bike facilities, cycling in Chicago has traditionally been a "top-down" affair. Under Daley, the city has installed paths, lanes and racks in an effort to coax people out of their cars.

But now that Chicago cycling has gained momentum while CDOT's bike initiatives have lost steam, it's time for a "bottom-up" approach. Citizens need to start pressuring City Hall to put the mettle to the pedal.

The Bike 2015 Plan, released in 2006, calls for the establishment of ten miles of "bike boulevards," traffic-calmed, residential streets where cycling is encouraged because cars are forced to slow down, common in Portland, Oregon, Berkeley and other cities. Last fall Sarah Kaplan grew frustrated that little action had been taken on this proposal. She formed the grassroots group Bike Boulevards Now! to lobby the city to get moving on the idea. CDOT Bicycle Program Coordinator Ben Gomberg now says he's hoping to establish Chicago's first bike boulevard by 2011.

If you want Chicago to remain a first-class bicycling town, contact your alderman, CDOT, or the Mayor's Office to demand that the City starts implementing big plans for biking—now. Tell them you want immediate action on exciting projects like separated bikeways, on-street bike racks, a new bike station, a large-scale bike-share program, city-funded ciclovías, on-street bike racks, a new bike station, a large-scale bike-share program, city-funded ciclovías and the Bloomingdale Trail. Or, better yet, form your own grassroots group, recruit members via the Chainlink, and start organizing for change. It's time to put the rubber on the road.

LINKED ON

Chicago cycling rides high with its own social network, Chainlink

AFTER FIVE YEARS OF SOLO BIKING in Chicago left her craving more interaction with fellow bikers, Leah Neaderthal realized her problem wasn't unique. "My friends didn't ride bikes," she says, and it took a lot of research to figure out which biking niche fit her style. The bike community is notoriously fragmented, and much of what makes it appealing to so many different people also makes it difficult to organize. "The bike community is unique because there are so many different kinds of riders in it," says Neaderthal.

But Neaderthal found a way to improve accessibility to bike activities while maintaining the diversity of the community. Neaderthal, who works in marketing for the software company Savo, started The Chainlink, an online community for Chicago bikers, and now runs the site with Julie Hochstadter. Neaderthal contacted club leaders, put fliers on people's bikes and spread the word. She didn't want to change the way any one organization biked—she just wanted it to be easier for people to find the bike community that fits their needs. "I think it's not just about riding with other people, it's about riding with other people who ride the way you do," says Neaderthal.

The Chainlink connects people to the bike resources already available in Chicago, with links to bike blogs, information about bike trails and postings about upcoming bike events. But the web site, which boasts almost 3,800 members, is more than an information aggregator. "People have gone on dates because of the web site," says Neaderthal.

The jury's out on whether you're more likely to find your stolen bike or your missed connection first, but The Bike Theft Task Force might improve your bike's odds. The vigilante bike rescuers, who organized on The Chainlink, hit up flea markets in search of bikes listed on the Chicago Stolen Bike Registry, an online forum that posts descriptions of stolen bikes. The Chainlink, says Neaderthal, has aided in the recovery of a number of stolen bikes.

Neaderthal says The Chainlink will continue to develop. Although she's keeping mum on the details, "We're investing to improve the site experience," she says. While you wait for the newest features on the web site, check out her favorite bike path: The North Branch Trail in Caldwell Woods. Neaderthal says it's best in the early morning. Maybe you'll find someone willing to wake up early and join you on The Chainlink. (Ella Christoph)

BIKE POWER

Alderman Robert Fioretti covers his ward on two wheels

IF YOU DRIVE THROUGH the South Loop or Bronzeville on a Saturday morning, there's a good chance you'll spot 2nd Ward Alderman Robert Fioretti out on his bicycle. Outgoing and lively, Fioretti would happily take a break from his bike to chat with you, but he might admonish you too. "Don't take the car," says Fioretti.

The alderman covers twenty-five miles each weekend, but he's not your typical week-

end warrior. "You're able to see things, instead of just driving by things," says Fioretti, who uses his weekly outings as a chance to see his community. Fioretti says he takes notes, calls 311 and "gets things fixed." He isn't talking in the abstract: the alderman carries graffiti-removing equipment with him and often goes ahead and makes the repairs himself.

"It's a great way to stay in touch," says Fioretti, who is inviting community members to join him for his weekend bike ride on Saturday, July 10. Getting out of a car and onto a bike, he says, will give community members a chance to experience an area they may drive through every day without really noticing what's around them. "History actually happened at some of these locations," says Fioretti, whose tour includes dozens of stops.

The alderman, who often stops and chats with his constituents along his bike ride, says he wants people to slow down and really see what's around them in his ward. Among the dozens of stops on his bike tour are Holy Family Church, built in 1857, the monument to the Haymarket Riot and Frank Lloyd Wright's row houses on South Calumet Avenue.

Fioretti's ten-mile tour will include the east side of his ward and Bronzeville (next year he'll do the west side, he says). The ride starts at Dunbar Park, 300 East 31st Street. Registration begins at 7:30am and the tour departs at 8:30am. Register online at chicago2ndward.com. (Ella Christoph)

RIDE A BEERCYCLE

New Belgium Brewing is built on the happy union of cycles and suds

THAT BICYCLE ON YOUR FAT TIRE BOTTLE is more than just a logo. In 1989, New Belgium Brewing Company founder Jeff Lebesch gained an affection for Belgian-style beer on a trip bicycling through Europe. His taste for Belgian-inspired beer and reverence for the bicycle that brought him to it remain two tenets of the Fort Collins, Colorado craft brewery, which saw eighteen-percent growth last year. Bryan Simpson, spokesperson for New Belgium, says that bicycle culture "is pretty much in our DNA." The company went commercial in 1991 when Lebesch and his wife Kim Jordan took their brew from a Colorado basement to bottles bearing a likeness to the fat-tired bicycle Lebesch traveled on over twenty years ago.

Simpson says that in 1999 and 2000, New Belgium made a conscious effort to return to its bicycle roots and started holding events that engaged the bicycle community in Colorado and wherever tires are spinning. Now in its eleventh year—its third in Chicago—their Tour de Fat celebration kicks off Saturday in Palmer Square Park. "The events we do are a great way to leave a lasting effect on the community and really raise a lot of money for local nonprofits in just one day," says Simpson.

Saturday's event will begin with a costumed bike parade and include live music and dance in celebration of bikes and beer. One of New Belgium's favorite events is the car-for-bike swap where a volunteer trades a car for a commuter bike. The first-ever swap took place in Chicago, and the organizers are still looking for a volunteer to switch to two wheels in 2010. (Andrew Rhoades)