

A PATH LESS TRAVELED BICYCLING'S "SPOKES-PERSONS" REFUSE TO REST ON LOCAL LAURELS

Author: MATT KRUPNICK, TIMES STAFF WRITER

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Gas guzzlers continue to sustain California's car culture, but Alex Zuckermann's rebel yell has never wavered in the past 30 years.

The 81-year-old Oakland resident, who traded his car for a bike decades ago, helped found the East Bay Bicycle Coalition in 1972 and kicked off a steady stream of advocacy efforts that have persisted over the years.

As the coalition's membership has swelled to 1,000 cyclists, Zuckermann and legions of others have made steady progress in the fight to make the Bay Area more bicycle-friendly.

"Many advocacy groups are there and then they fade away," said Zuckermann, acknowledged by many as the region's father of bicycle advocacy. "We have learned staying power."

Among other reasons, cyclists say endurance is needed because:

- Accidents on East Bay roads kill several bicyclists a year and injure hundreds more.
- Mountain bikers have fought unsuccessfully for access to trails in many East Bay parks.
- In response to these and other problems, bicyclists have become effective transportation watchdogs.

Groups like the East Bay coalition, formed to persuade BART to allow bikes on trains, have pressed city, county, state and federal officials to make roads and transit systems as friendly to two-wheeled vehicles as they are to four-wheeled ones.

Bicyclists have ingrained themselves in Bay Area transportation planning to the point where most senior planners know activists personally. The two groups may not always see eye to eye, but most planners admit the cyclists have been helpful in making roads, bridges, and trains more accessible to bikes.

"Planning is always a tug of war between different priorities," said John Cunningham, a senior transportation planner with Contra Costa County. "It's good to have a diverse range of input. If we don't have input from the advocates, we run the risk of going in the wrong direction."

Those advocates who have kept up a steady flow of lobbying say they feel satisfaction about their accomplishments.

Bikes, once relegated to the back of the rear BART car, are now allowed throughout most trains. Every normal-sized bus in the AC Transit fleet has a rack for two bikes, and new buses being planned for transbay service will be able to carry two or more bikes.

When the east span of the Bay Bridge is rebuilt, it will include bike lanes, and Grand Avenue in Oakland was reduced from six lanes to four to make room for cyclists. Advocates recently persuaded officials to agree to a bike lane on the Richmond-San Rafael bridge.

"We're making progress," Zuckermann said. "It's not enough, but --"

One of the obstacles plaguing bike advocates and transportation planners is the lack of trustworthy statistics on the number of cyclists in the Bay Area, a situation that has made it difficult to focus planning.

Even as recreational and competitive cycling groups report booming membership, census figures show the number of bicycle commuters in the East Bay changed little between 1990 and 2000.

"One of the things that's tricky is the lack of data we have," said Elizabeth Deakin, a UC Berkeley city and regional planning professor who directs the UC Transportation Center. "There's been some disagreement in the biking community about what's needed."

The numbers that are available show a surge in Bay Area biking.

Since 1991, the East Bay Bicycle Coalition's membership has increased to 1,000 from 175, and the Cal Cycling Club at UC Berkeley has nearly three times the members it had three years ago.

A recent Grand Prix bike race in San Francisco attracted four-time Tour de France champion Lance Armstrong, and whether or not they ride, thousands of fans attended to watch him.

A 2001 study by RIDES for Bay Area Commuters, a nonprofit group funded by several transportation agencies, determined only about 1 percent of Bay Area commuters use bikes as their primary means of transportation.

Census numbers essentially match that figure, although less than one-half of 1 percent of Contra Costa County commuters use bikes. Slightly more than 1 percent of Alameda County commuters use bicycles, and San Francisco's figure stands at 2 percent. Most of those numbers declined between 1990 and 2000.

To encourage people to ride, many bicycle groups have made it their mission to change perceptions about the difficulty of biking to work, and air-quality officials stress the importance of making short trips by bike because cars tend to pollute the most in the first couple of miles they are used.

Critical Mass, a highly visible group started a decade ago in San Francisco, pours bicyclists onto city streets by the hundreds, slowing traffic in an attempt to decrease the number of cars on the road.

"Every person that rides a bike for transportation is helping to reduce congestion," said Robert Raburn, executive director of the East Bay Bicycle Coalition. "It doesn't take very many people to tip the scales. If you subtract a hundred cars from the Bay Bridge over an hour, that might make a difference."

Cyclists and public officials attribute the biking boom to factors such as personal beliefs, terrain and a temperate climate.

"We've always had a strong environmental ethic in the Bay Area," said Dave Burch, a senior environmental planner with the Bay Area Air Quality Management District. "Also, I think it's partially that the Bay Area might lend itself well to cycling. Certainly eight months out of the year we have good conditions for cycling."

Aiding cycling's cause is the fact that many of its proponents stand tall in the pedals.

Raburn sold his car in February and uses bikes, trains and other public transportation to navigate the Bay Area.

Yehuda Sherman, a 72-year-old retired doctor who has been active in making his hometown of Lafayette more bicycle-friendly, stores about a dozen bikes in lockers at BART stations.

Zuckermann chose many years ago to bike to work and other places.

"I had been driving the car for years and years," he said. "To suddenly leave the car at home and make a six-mile commute (on a bike) was incredible. There's not only the feeling that you're doing something good for the environment, but also the feeling of freedom."

That freedom has taken some cars off the roads but hasn't decreased the headaches for transportation planners.

Caltrans engineers, who spent decades designing highways and roads almost exclusively for motorized vehicles, were instructed last year by agency head Jeff Morales, an avid bicyclist, to accommodate nonmotorized travel in California transportation planning. Advocacy groups have embraced the mandate, Directive 64, as an example of good government.

The directive represents a clear shift in strategy for the state agency, which has started working with other agencies to reduce obstacles for bicycle riders, said Julian Carroll, a senior Caltrans transportation planner who coordinates bicycle planning in Northern California and the Central Valley.

Before Directive 64, "some projects did have bicycle components," Carroll said. "We just weren't under a directive to do it. We did accommodate bicycles, but probably not as well as we could have."

Cities and counties across the East Bay have set up bicycle advisory committees to keep bikes in mind when planning transportation projects, but cycling advocates say it is imperative for Caltrans to be part of the process to prevent major thoroughfares from cutting off bike access to entire areas of the East Bay.

While state transportation officials agree with the sentiment, they argue that it isn't always as simple as adding bike lanes to a highway or bridge.

"I think sometimes (bike groups) are looking beyond reality," Carroll said. "The bottom line is people in charge are going to base (decisions) on finances and safety and liability. You have to balance those needs."

In Antioch, some bicyclists have criticized the city for a lack of bike lanes, but officials say they have striped every main street with the lanes and done just about everything possible to make the city bicycle-friendly.

"We have probably 20 miles of bike lanes," said Ed Franzen, an Antioch traffic engineer. "It's not like we're not being responsive."

The amount of grant money available for bike-related projects has risen in recent years, and cities with mainly recreational cyclists have found themselves in the rare position of having too much funding.

"We're looking at where we need something so we can apply for money," said Franzen, whose city's bicyclists are mostly 10 to 16 years old. "We're running out of projects we can do."

Such situations are rare, activists counter, and much remains to be done in cities across the Bay Area.

Perhaps the most volatile recent battle was the effort to add bike lanes to the Richmond-San Rafael bridge. Bicyclists recently persuaded officials to build the lanes, a project that will cost an estimated \$3.7 million.

The fight, which lasted decades, illustrates the power Bay Area bicyclists have gained over the past 30 years.

Activists say it is important to take concerns to public officials politely and in plenty of time for the requests to be considered. People who come to meetings late in the planning process and yell at officials shouldn't expect satisfactory results, said Sherman, the Lafayette resident and Contra Costa County's representative for the East Bay Bicycle Coalition.

"You can't antagonize people and then expect them to do you a favor," he said.

Not all bike advocates understand the concept of respect, but the situation has improved, said Carroll of Caltrans.

"If they understood and they came with a positive solution or approach, they would get a better response," he said. "They also have to realize that they've come a long way and need to stay positive."

Some analysts say it is understandable for cyclists to be pessimistic when many transportation planners still seem to view cycling needs as frivolous.

"I think it's kind of viewed as a nicety rather than a necessity," said Deakin of UC Berkeley. "That's the frustration, treating bikes as a frill rather than something that can make a big difference."

Photo Captions:

Photo 1, STEPHEN SKORY of the Cal Cycling Club sips from a water bottle as student Martina Patella, right, rests after a 1.5-mile uphill climb during a club ride last month in Berkeley's Tilden Park. (Nader Khouri/ Times); Photo 2, ALEX ZUCKERMANN, 82, founder of the East Bay Bicycle Coalition, prepares to ride off to a bike access meeting last month in Oakland.

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