

Mia Birk - Portland City Club Presentation

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It would be easy to think that the Portland we see today has always been what it is. Easy, but wrong. It didn't just happen. We *made* it happen.

In 1993, I started working as the City's Bicycle Coordinator for Commissioner Earl Blumenauer, who told me, "Mia, we have an enormous opportunity here. I want us to be the Country's most bicycle friendly City."

At the time, we had Earl's leadership, a little bit of federal, state, and local funding, and a burgeoning advocacy movement in the BTA. On the flip side, we had almost no bikeways, few people biking and a skeptical public. Bureaucracy staff were exclusively trained in moving people and goods by cars. And the business community was not quite ready then to embrace bicycle transportation. In a discussion about requiring bike parking, the head of the Building Managers and Owners Association asked, "When is this silliness going to stop? Are you going to require us to put in ski racks or toy chests too?"

I faced similar opposition from the school districts, campuses, Police and Fire Bureaus, and many neighborhood and business associations.

For years, I hauled a bike trailer and slide projector around Portland, speaking to business and neighborhood groups, civic organizations and service clubs. I would talk about the health impacts of sedentary lifestyles, and the increasing problems in air quality and congestion. I would discuss the need for a comprehensive bikeway system and describe the options available – bike lanes, off-street paths, neighborhood bicycle boulevards, bike parking, and education, encouragement, and enforcement.

Although most folks thought I was an alien from outer space, a few would chat with me at the end. Their doctors had told them to get more exercise, or they wanted their kids to bike in the neighborhood or to school, like they had once done. So I figured, if every group I talk to had 20 or 30 participants, and two or three or four opened their minds to bicycling as a result, that meant I was influencing 10 to 20 percent. If each of those folks started bicycling and their friends saw them getting healthier and fitter, and then their friends and kids started biking, well.... I was on the right track, of that I was sure.

In 1996, City Council adopted the Bicycle Master Plan along with an official City Policy: Make the bicycle an integral part of daily life in Portland. The revolution was underway.

With our partners at the Parks Bureau and Metro, we set about adding hundreds of miles of bike lanes, paths, and boulevards, along with thousands of bike parking spaces. In 1996 I explored 18 bicycle-friendly European cities and brought back innovative ideas to expand our bikeway toolkit. With our community partners and friends, we seeded bike-related events and activities – Bike Commute Day, Bike Commute Challenge, BikeFest on the Burnside Bridge, BridgePedal, and the Worst DOTY Ride, which annually proves that the best way to guarantee nice weather is to declare it, well, the exact opposite.

Bicycle transportation is a simple, win-win solution for our complex energy, environmental, livability, and health problems.

We have created, in less than a generation, a City in which people can and do choose bicycling as a normal, everyday means of transportation. Many of us live a car-free or car-light existence. We have more money in our pockets. We are fitter and healthier. Our kids arrive by foot or bike at school energetic and ready to learn. We are less stressed. We are more free.

As of 2008, five to eight percent of Portland commute trips are bicycle trips, up from 1% 15 years ago. For less than one percent of Portland's transportation budget, we've increased bicycling from negligible to significant. For the cost of one mile of freeway – about \$50 million – we've built 275 of bikeways. **That's one heckuva bang-for-buck investment!**

What could we achieve if we were willing to invest two or three percent of our transportation dollars? As bicycle friendly as we are, we have only scratched the surface of what we can become – we may be the nation's most bicycle friendly city, but we are decidedly second tier in comparison to cities like Copenhagen with its incredible network of protected cycle tracks and 36% bike commute mode share. What if we invested six or seven percent? I believe we could reach a 20% mode share, overall.

Does that sound crazy? It shouldn't. According to the City Auditor's report, more than 15% of Portlanders report using the bicycle for transportation. This number is as high as 28% in some of Portland's close-in neighborhoods.

On certain corridors, bicyclists account for more than 17% of the vehicles. On the Hawthorne, Steel, Burnside, and Broadway Bridges, close to 17,000 trips are made by bicycle daily. If you add in pedestrian trips, that's the equivalent of a four-lane bridge worth of auto traffic travelling by bike or foot.

Through the City's Safe Routes to School program, which I had the honor of leading for three years, we helped increase bicycling and walking to school to 38% of school commute trips in 25 schools. The City's Smart Trips, Women on Bikes, and Sunday Parkways Programs, are all making a big difference for a tiny fraction of what we spend on motor vehicle movement.

These numbers represent a massive increase in bicycle use, directly tied to the City's investment in bicycle infrastructure and promotion. Our increasing bicycle use has substantially outpaced the growth in population and motor vehicle usage. We've shown that bicycling can be an incredibly positive means of transportation for tens of thousands of residents and businesses.

No matter what business you're in, bicycle transportation is good for your bottom line. Employees who bike to work, or on the weekends or for other trips, save you MONEY in reduced health care costs and absenteeism. They show up at work feeling good and ready to work. Those of us who sit in traffic, listening to non-stop negative news on the radio, come to work stressed and ready to complain. The more we get single occupancy drivers off the roads, the easier it is for freight vehicles to be able to deliver goods to our stores.

I encourage business owners to get involved with the Bicycle Transportation Alliance, which, this summer, will launch its new Bicycle-Friendly Business Initiative with seed funding from Cycle Oregon. Jay, Jonathan and I have all been working with the BTA to craft this project, which will engage more businesses in attaining the benefits of bicycling. And I applaud the Mayor's announcement yesterday about the proposed SW Broadway cycle track and \$500,000 "affordable transportation" capital fund.

For those of you who might question this use of resources, I say this: we have invested billions in our transportation system and it is our responsibility to get as much out of it as we possibly can. It would be irresponsible NOT to invest in bicycle transportation. Together, with walking, streetcar, bus, and light rail,

we will realize the vision of a livable, walkable, lovable, sustainable, and economically viable Portland.

When I was at the City, I loved seeing my ideas realized as we installed more bikeways and more people started riding. After I left the city in 1999, I started Alta Planning + Design in my kitchen. We're now 60 staff in 10 offices nationwide, with our HQ in a historic building we bought and renovated on SE Grand, soon-to-be home of the next streetcar line.

Around 2003, I realized that my job was going to a lot easier if we could elevate the professional capacity of our engineers, planners, architects, and landscape architects. I started teaching a course on bicycle and pedestrian issues in urban planning at Portland State University. With Jay Graves, Scott Bricker, Rex Burkholder, and Jennifer Dill, and seed funding through the Oregon Transportation Research and Education Consortium and Cycle Oregon, we created the Initiative for Bicycle and Pedestrian Innovation so we could teach students and professionals and research pedestrian and bicycle-related techniques, projects, and programs.

Through Alta, I have worked in 48 U.S. states and four countries. We have implemented more than 5000 miles of bikeways and walkways, touched more than 1000 communities. Even better still, we have enhanced the health and daily lives of millions of people.

So it's not just Portland realizing the win-win benefits of investing in bicycle transportation and promotion. This fabulous virus is spreading all throughout North America. From up here in the green NW to the California suburbs and Cascade foothills, the beaches, plains, large cities, small towns, ex-urbs, and the heartland of rural America, we've been finding ways to make communities more human, healthy, safe, and splendid.

This is the essential message of my forthcoming memoir, [Joyride: One Women's Journey to Empower People and Transform Communities](#). (See mia.altaprojects.net for pre-ordering information.) Everywhere I've been and everywhere I go, I see, smell, taste, hear, and feel hope for a more sustainable future. It's a Joyride, indeed.

Used to be, when I would be home for the holidays in my hometown Dallas, TX, in the heart of car culture USA, my parents' friends would corner me at a party, totally baffled by my career. "Now, what is that you do again, honey? Something to do with bicycles? Is that like Greenpeace? Now why did ya'll have to blow up that boat?"

My stepfather Tommy Thompson, a good 'ole boy native of the oil rig-land of East Texas, used to love to get my goat with affectionate words like, "Why Mia, yer jest a young uppity flamethrower. This environmental crap is for ya'll hippies. You don't understand a thing about the real world!"

Last November I was home for Thanksgiving, and he beckoned me to the garage, where hanging from a hook was a gleaming Marin road bike. Not only that, Tommy had bought a bike and helmet for me, so I could ride with him around his suburban subdivision.

"You know Mia, I used to think you were crazy. Now I think you were just ahead of your time. You were right then, and you're right on now. Let's ride!"

Mia Birk

Principal, Alta Planning + Design

711 SE Grand

Portland OR 97214

503 230 9862

cell 503 880 8615

www.altaplanning.com