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CYCLING WHEELS UP THE POLICY AGENDA

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WASHINGTON -- Can you imagine several hundred of this capital city's policy wonks turning out for a two-hour discussion of *bicycling*?

A decade ago, it would have been unthinkable. But this month it happened, sponsored by the esteemed Brookings Institution, at a prime U.S. Capitol-view room of the fancy new Newseum on Pennsylvania Avenue.

It may have helped that the program included musician-artist-cultural innovator David Byrne, whose decades of cycling and observing cities worldwide is reflected in his book "Bicycle Diaries" (Viking).

But the new buzz about cycling is clearly a mark of the times. You can credit snarled traffic, ennui with driving, rising oil prices and/or concern about greenhouse gas emissions. Then there is the growing popular desire to revoke the monopoly control that cars and trucks have on our streets and public spaces. There's a clear tie to the "Complete Streets" movement, advancing the ideas of shared urban turf long espoused by such groups as Partners for Livable Communities and the Project for Public Spaces.

The scene is also set, though, with Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood declaring "livable communities" a priority goal of his department. And -- important to the policymaking set -- there'll be the opportunity to enrich the 2010 reauthorization of the federal transportation program with bike-friendly provisions.

Rep. Earl Blumenauer, D-Ore., founder-chair of the Congressional Bike Caucus and official Washington's lead advocate for the cause, enlivened the Newseum event with a whimsical question: "How many people, right now, are stuck in traffic on their way to ride a stationary bicycle in a health club?"

Then he asked: "Why can't we have bike lanes on Pennsylvania Avenue? This is a vision that can happen -- an example for every community in the country."

(Disclosure: Blumenauer and I are old friends and we sometimes encounter each other riding our bikes around Washington.)

Blumenauer foresees a possible "quantum increase" in pro-bike features in the upcoming transportation bill, including "green routes to work" and enlarging the Transportation Department's existing Safe Routes to School program to include high schools. He also favors an expansion from four to 50 cities of an existing pilot program designed to make "mode shifts" toward walking and biking.

The big news of the Newseum affair -- the kickoff of a national "Cities for Cycling" initiative -- was brought by Janette Sadik-Khan, New York's transportation commissioner who is fast gaining repute in transportation circles for her aggressive efforts to tame traffic and create bike- and pedestrian-safe routes in America's largest city.

"People want to ride bikes. Make it safe for them and they will come," said Sadik-Khan, noting the sponsorship of the new C4C (citiesforcycling.org) campaign by the 13-year-old National Association of City Transportation Officials (including department heads from Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, New York, Philadelphia, Phoenix, Portland, San Francisco, Seattle and Washington).

C4C's goal is to spread the word of a surprisingly broad but not well-known range of pro-bike experiments that are already being tried in some U.S. and foreign cities.

One example: going beyond the increasingly familiar painted -- but unprotected -- street bike lanes by adding two- or three-foot wide buffer strips between the bike lanes and other traffic.

Even more safety is provided by "cycle tracks" -- lanes that are totally protected from motorized traffic by plantings or mountable curbs, sometimes with special cycle traffic signals at intersections. Cycle tracks take space and may be expensive to install. But if cities expect more women, or whole families, to set out on cycle expeditions across town, nothing less may do. Currently cycle track installations are being tried in New York, San Francisco, Washington, Portland, Ore., Cambridge, Mass., and St. Petersburg, Fla. -- plus Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands.

Another pioneering experiment described on the C4C Web site: low traffic volume streets, dubbed "bike boulevards," which still allow cars but are made more safe for cyclists by traffic-calming, speed-inhibiting devices such as traffic islands, special pavement marking and signs. Portland is the U.S. leader, but several other cities, Chicago, Long Beach and Seattle included, are trying the same.

Blumenauer says there's "no one cookie-cutter solution" for bikes in cities, that each town needs to make its own choices. And there are rural issues, too, he notes: Unless sufficient shoulders are added to country roads, bikes are dangerously exposed -- "a suicide situation."

How do bicycles pay their way on the roads, since they obviously don't pay gas taxes? Cycling in place of car use is "the most cost-effective way to free up road space," says Blumenauer. But he suggests that in return for roadway use, cyclists should be open to "a tiny fee" for the biking equipment they purchase.

The idea is a sort of watershed -- cyclists starting to qualify not just as recreation supplicants but serious players in America's transportation decisions. It's about time.

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