



Transformers!

Politicians, policy makers and cycling culture

Finely-tuned political and civic effort is required to implement any successful urban transformation. The US city of Chicago, known as “the windy city”, is a political template for communities looking to install better cycling infrastructure, writes Jerry Soverinsky

When *Bicycling Magazine* proclaimed Chicago the best large cycling city in the US in 2001, it was a tribute to the city’s sustained effort at developing a cycling infrastructure. This was no small feat for a community where large-scale, cultural change is often met with skepticism.

Much of the praise is due to city mayor Richard M Daley, but he would be quick to share recognition with the thousands of dedicated people — employees and volunteers — who work to turn Chicago from a motor-dominated metropolis into a motor-dominated metropolis committed to the interests of cyclists.

Even a mayor with clout cannot singlehandedly overhaul a city’s attitudes. It takes a coordinated political and civic drive and the way that Chicago has gone about this is an example to others seeking to implement such a culture.

“Chicago successfully integrates efforts from three areas,” says Ben Gomberg, bicycle programme coordinator at the Chicago Department of Transport. “There’s the political leadership, there’s a commitment of city agencies, and there’s a partnership with the public, which is represented by a strong advocacy group.”

Without the cooperation of all three, Gomberg says, change may come, but it will not be as efficient or as effective as in Chicago.

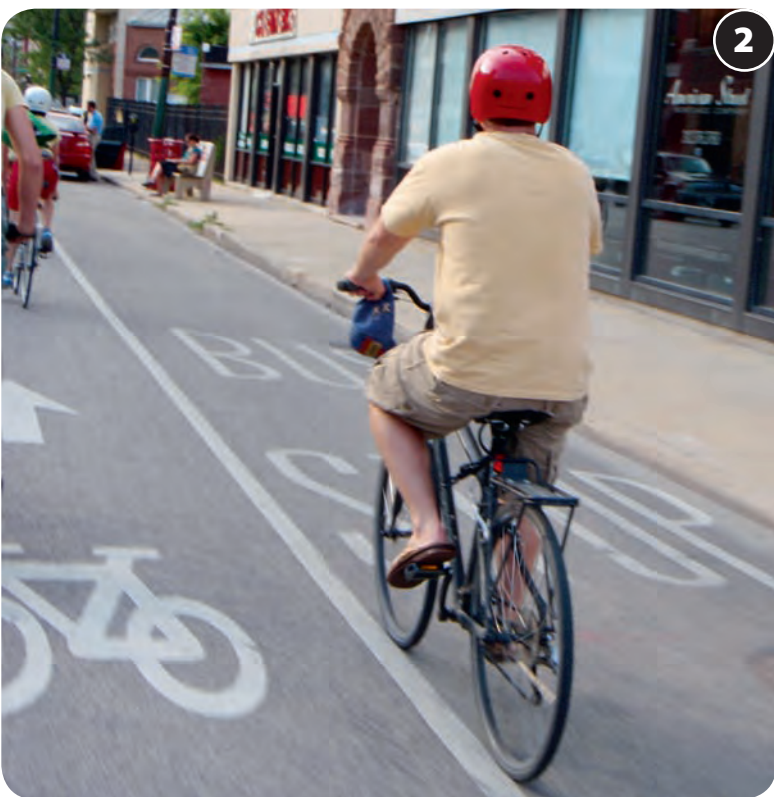
The city’s cycling commitment precedes the Richard M Daley administration; officials developed a plan in 1948 which outlined bike paths for the city’s parks and along Lake Michigan lakefront. This was refined in a 1967 plan created when Daley’s father, Richard J Daley, was mayor.

The city’s aggressive effort at developing a cycling infrastructure continued under Richard M. In 1991, he formed a bicycle advisory council “to establish city-wide policies for bicycle-related improvements”. Less than a year later, the council published its Bike 2000 plan, a detailed blueprint that laid out 31 recommendations to encourage cycling. Significant progress was made, including:

- establishing a network of more than 150 miles (240km) of on-street and off-street cycle paths
- installing 10,000 bike parking racks
- permitting bicycles on city trains and buses

The city’s work was far from done, however. In 2006, the council published its most ambitious set of goals in its Bike 2015 plan, part of Daley’s commitment “to make Chicago the most bicycle-friendly city in the US”.

The 2015 plan identifies two main goals: increasing bicycle use so that 5% of all trips five miles (8km) or less are made by bicycle, and halving the number of bicycle injuries from the 1996 figure. It



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Pictures: Left, Active Transport Alliance; Middle and right, Chris Brumm

also aims to develop a comprehensive bike network, improve education (of motorist and cyclist), increase bike parking, introduce bike-friendly streets and improve public transport integration.

the plan's objectives include:

- establishing a 500 miles (805km) cycle network, so that every Chicago resident is within half a mile (0.8km) of an established cycle route
- installing 5,000 additional bike racks and 1,000 long-term parking spaces
- providing convenient connections between cycle routes and public transport

the plan puts forward 150 strategies for achieving these objectives, with realistic and cost-effective solutions. It includes a framework of performance measures as well as a timetable for completion. Most importantly, each objective is accompanied by suggested sources of funding to try to minimise the cost to the city. According to Gomberg, since 1992 Chicago has received \$72m (€53m) in federal grant funding for bike projects, along with \$18m (€13m) in matching funds.

Many of the city's strategies are eligible for federal funds through the national Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement (CMAQ) funding stream, while other funds come from aldermanic menu money (an initiative launched in 2009 that allocates money toward transportation improvements) or street resurfacing projects (not automatic, it depends on street width and traffic conditions).

Mostly, these funding sources relate to government allocations and as such, require a great deal of political finesse and relationship building.

"What you're talking about is how public space is used," says Randy Neufeld, former executive director of the Chicagoland Bicycle Federation, the city's major bike advocacy group which later became the Active Transportation Alliance (ATA). "How you win space to

1. Chicago's annual Bike the Drive event, where the city closes Lake Shore Drive to motorists for one Sunday morning and opens it just to cyclists. Tens of thousands of cyclists take part

2. A combination of political and civic effort is required to win space for cyclists

3. Political success in Chicago is clearly demonstrable through the rising levels of utility cyclists who now commute by bike despite adverse weather

accommodate bikes on public space takes political support, and you do that at every level of government."

that political support stretches beyond the city to span federal, state, and local entities. "that's what the ATA has done over the past decade," Neufeld says, "it has built support at congressional and state level, with the city, with suburban mayors, with city councils, and with aldermen. Once you get that support, you can compete for space and money."

Today, a network of signs and lane designations blankets Chicago's lakefront and streets. City residents are embracing cycling for recreation, commuting and fitness. I've lived in Chicago for nearly 20 years and have seen the dramatic increase in the number of cyclists, especially commuters like myself who forge through slush-covered streets in the frigid, blustery days of winter.

Don't just take my word for it: the city's effort is showing clear results. Chicago can boast 148 miles (238km) of on-street and 42 miles (68km) of off-street cycle paths, 12,000 cycle parking racks and 240 miles (386km) of signed cycle routes.

Gomberg says: "We count bike traffic on certain intersections, and whereas six years ago, on Milwaukee Avenue during a two-hour period, 225 bikes were counted, today that figure is nearly 800 bikes. that's a direct result of the city's efforts."

these figures will continue to increase, for as the Bike 2015 plan notes: "[Success] depends on four factors: a commitment by key city agencies to implement the recommended strategies; significant and sustained funding; continued political support, and a strong partnership with Chicago's bicycling community."

With a sustained political and civic effort that continues to focus on these elements, Chicago is well positioned for long-term bike-friendly success. ■