

Cycle Action

Promoting 'soft' transport options - cycling and walking - has become something of a pet project for central and local government. Both the 2002 New Zealand Transport Strategy and Land Transport Management Bill require such options to be incorporated within roading cost-benefit analysis, and a national strategy to increase cycling and walking has just been released for comment. Regional land transport strategies refer to the need to promote cycling and walking. All consider the integration of soft transport options as a necessary part of sustainable development.

Indeed, the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development considers soft transport options as a key to sustainability, adding that transport itself is arguably the activity presenting the greatest challenge to sustainable development. This is largely because gains made in efficiency and design are more than off-set by a desire to travel further, faster, and more often.

Thus, while cycling and walking are seen as good things, like many good things, most of us see them as being done by other people. We would all like to cycle and walk more often, but, well, the kids have to go to sport, there's the shopping, I have to have my car at work, the only way to see my friends and family is to drive or fly, I hate helmet hair and getting wet...In addition, improving this kind of sustainability requires not only a shift in attitude, but an acceptance of a curtailment of rights, in this case, the right to travel. And then there is the real clincher: soft options are marginal to the real job of transport, which is to boost economic activity. As such, promoting soft options is anti-progress.

Human-powered mobility pretty well meets acceptable measures of sustainability. It has low energy intensity, low pollution, high social interactivity (well, potentially - being the only pedestrian or cyclist beside or on a busy road can be a lonely experience), and it improves health and well-being. But ultimately, few people can exercise these options, because of the way we have designed our physical, social and

economic infrastructures. In addition, the New Zealand Government wants us back in the top half of the OECD's economic rankings. And that, among other things, requires far better transportation. Which, from a national economy viewpoint, means more efficient transport, and, particularly, more efficient transport for motorised vehicles.

Thus promoting truly sustainable transport requires re-jigging our life styles and, in particular, expectations for those systems underpinning our economy.

The Government has introduced a transport strategy and a Land Transport Management Bill requiring the better integration of transport options, while dealing with analysis showing a need to complete existing roading systems. In other words, we want more people cycling and walking (among other things) while other people travel faster and further on purpose-built roads, making it harder for people to cycle and walk.

The roading lobby sees the contradiction, essentially arguing that money raised for roads should not be spent on cyclists and pedestrians. They recognise the latter are a good thing, but preferably when kept well away from roads because they claim, as noted, that the real role of transport systems is to promote economic activity. But splitting these modes defeats the purpose of integrated transport: walking and cycling should be as legitimate an option as any other; keeping them off main routes (which are main routes for obvious reasons), is a nonsense.

Let's focus on cycling, and in particular, cycling in Auckland. After all, I am a cyclist, and live in Auckland. But, more legitimately, as British ex-MP, London mayoral candidate and chair of the UK National Cycling Strategy Board Steve Norris puts it, if you want sustainable cities, you have to have cycling as a real option. But it has largely been planned out of urban areas.

The reasons for this are psychological as well as practical. In colonial outposts such as New Zealand, Australia, and North America, cities evolved with the car. In addition, cycling is synonymous with 'wimpy', 'being poor', and 'they don't pay a road levy so they shouldn't be there anyway'. Real people drive cars. In a revealingly honest comment, the Ministry of Transport noted that internationally, car ownership and use is positively linked to GDP per capita and personal, or household, incomes. Once you've made it, you buy a car. And, once you've bought a car, not only do you not have to cycle, you shouldn't: it's not good for the economy.

To show that the economic argument is spurious, consider traffic congestion management. Comparing the footprint of a cyclist at 10 km per hour versus a car (the footprint including the required stopping distance at that speed), and taking into account the average low occupancy of cars in Auckland, if ten percent of car drivers shifted to cycles at peak traffic flow times, congestion could drop around 3-4 per cent; if they used cycle lanes rather than roads, peak congestion could drop around 8 per cent. Crucially, car-parking problems would ease. The figures look even more attractive with higher speeds.

In addition, companies could provide cycle facilities (including showers and changing rooms) at substantially less cost than company cars and parking spaces. This is not to mention that cycle running costs are roughly 3-5 percent of vehicle running costs; that cycling offers greater mobility for those with limited transport options; and commuter cycling contributes to the incidental activity now favoured as part of the battle against 'obesogenic' (fat-inducing) environments.

Meanwhile, planning authorities have long mouthed platitudes supporting cycling (and walking), but (with exceptions such as Christchurch) have done relatively little. As an example, in 1997, the Auckland City Council released its *Cycle and Walking Strategy*. Council staff detailed the design criteria and goals for achieving better integration of 'soft transport' into Auckland's travelling mix. Yet a document written some seventeen years earlier, the *1980 Interim Report: Cycling in Auckland* also

detailed the design criteria and goals for achieving better integration of 'soft transport' into Auckland's travelling mix. The City Council staff had not, it seemed, been aware of the previous document.

Apart from the lack of institutional memory, this demonstrates the overwhelming influence of the current car culture on shaping Auckland city. Both the 1980 and 1997 documents concluded that greater Auckland does not plan for, nor actively encourage, cycling. Things may have improved recently, with annual funding resulting in off-road cycle ways, dedicated bike and bus-bike lanes, cycle parking facilities, and even serious talk of making it possible to cycle across the Harbour Bridge, probably Auckland's best example of exclusion-by-design. But the integration is still on the margins. Transit is currently completing a link from central Auckland through to the main hospital at Grafton. The link excludes cycling and walking. Certainly, retrofitting a city hard-wired in favour of motorised transport is a headache. But you would think they could manage to include these options in a new road.

We now have a city designed by default to exclude cyclists. Building a city on an isthmus between two large harbours on a country already naturally narrow certainly reduces your roading design options. But we then followed that up with road design features that seem to deliberately exclude consideration of the effect on cyclists. (And it's the small things that count - such as failing to properly bevel the edge of roads, thereby leaving a wheel-tripping lip). This created a momentum for roads, complicated by deferred decision-making, which now means there is a need to complete projects inherited from outmoded planning regimes.

We now mix in fast cars and slow cyclists in what a colleague described as the growing 'speed differential': vehicles have got faster on roads designed to allow them to go faster, and there are more of them. Cyclists are limited by legs and lungs and so, in response, behave more anarchically to survive. Which just makes vehicle drivers even madder.

Eventually the anarchists may die out. Not necessarily as a result of being collected by adrenalin-driven drivers, but through lack of recruitment. Unless the roads and drivers are more cycle friendly, the next generation will simply not cycle. So we now have a double barrier: physical exclusion by design, and an inability to ride.

The Land Transport Management Bill requires Transfund to prepare a ten-year, long-term financial plan that must take account of the new Long Term Council Community Plans. This opens up the possibility of the better incorporation of social and ecological benefit-cost analysis as part of an asset management strategy. The changes increase the likelihood of options such as cycling receiving more direct funding support, and benefiting from the more accurate targeting of where the true costs of transport lie.

But watch for the roading lobbies' continued vociferous attacks on 'green' transport. They see these costs as an unfair imposition, driven by a politically-correct agenda. And it is fair to say the extra costs *will* fall disproportionately on some existing road users, who, for commercial reasons, can't avoid them. Yet this shift reflects the realisation that these road users have, in effect, been subsidised by the rest of society. The road lobby will bristle at this suggestion. But the subsidies are largely non-economic, and come in the form of ecological impacts, social dislocation and poor health. It is true it has taken time for these hidden subsidies to be revealed, but now that they are, they can't be ignored. And, by the way, motorists pay road taxes to compensate for the damage they do to public carriageways. Cyclists don't do any damage - and we still pay towards non-state highway roading.

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