

Retraining the Humans

A top bike planner offers lessons, inspiration for Eugene

Mia Birk, one of the nation's leading bike planners, spoke to a packed room in Eugene last week as part of her book tour for *Joyride: Pedaling Toward a Healthier Planet*.

Birk's Portland firm Alta Planning is one of the consultants on a new Eugene bike plan now under way. "It's not just the story of me or Alta, it's the story of our whole country," she said of her book to a standing-room-only crowd of more than 100 at the Oregon Electric Station.

Birk, in a skirt and with her biker legs in tall boots, flashed an embarrassing slide of herself as a "chubster" teen in Texas during her talk. "We would drive across to the street to the grocery store," she said of her auto-centric upbringing. "I was overweight and pretty depressed."

Birk described how she got hooked on biking and lost weight in graduate school studying international transportation and energy issues and wound up in Portland as the city's bike coordinator from 1993 to 1999. When she started, Portland was being sued by bike advocates for violating the state bike bill requiring bike lanes. "Bureaucratic staff were exclusively trained in moving people and goods by

the city had backed off a new bike parking code to make the code voluntary. "I am just screaming," she says of her meeting with the responsible planning director.

A city commissioner backs her in disbelief that the school district has opposed bike parking for kids, and the City Council overrules the Planning Commission, according to Birk.

But then she has to fight hard to get the city bureaucracy to include the required bike parking in a City Hall remodel, she said. "It's not enough to add a plan a code, you have to retrain every human."

Birk said the city later had a waiting list of 200 businesses wanting to remove a parking space for a 20-bike, on-street parking corral.

Birk said her daughter's school now has 50 percent biking and walking. Biking offers a "win, win solution for our complex environmental, livability and health problems," she said.

Citywide, Portland counts have shown bike ridership grow from 1 percent to 8 percent, with some neighborhoods reaching 28 percent, she said, noting the importance of

by tragedy" to install bike boxes at intersections after a fatal "right-hook" accident.

After federal bureaucrats put up "unbelievable" opposition to endorsing bike innovations in their official manual, Birk said she formed Cities for Cycling to push for reforms.

Even Dallas, Texas, now wants bike facilities, she said. Birk was wary when the city hired her as a consultant, but businesses there offered, "how can we help you; do you need some of our property; can we give you some money?"

Biking is good for business, according to Birk. She points to her study showing 1,500 jobs from Portland's \$100 million bike industry; a study showing the local economy saves \$1 billion a year by driving less; research showing the importance of biking to attracting a "creative class" vital for city economies; and a recent Maryland study showing that bike projects create twice as many jobs as road projects.

As for Birk's book *Joyride*, she's sharing the profits with bike advocacy groups. Other books have talked about the environmental, livability and health benefits of biking, but Birk's book, written with the help of bike author Joe Kurmaskie, shows what it's like to actually make change happen in the trenches.

She chronicles the citizen ravings at public meetings and back-room obstinance of entrenched bureaucrats that must be overcome for cities to evolve. Birk pulls few punches and provides a rare, look at how local government really works.

She provides some forceful arguments such as, "the burden of safety must be squarely placed on the more dangerous vehicle operator." And she takes on a vocal "fringe" of vehicular cycling advocates who oppose bike lanes as somehow less safe than bravely "taking" a car lane with their bikes. She says that approach will leave the 60 percent who would consider biking if they felt safer in their cars, and "retain cycling as an elite sport of a privileged group of adrenaline junkies."

Eugene's UO-fueled bike commute rate is almost double that in larger Portland, but Birk and her book still offer a lot of inspiration and lessons for here.

Where Eugene's bike bureaucrats have often appeared meek, Birk was a hard-driving go-getter not afraid to be a "pain in the tush" to her bureaucratic colleagues. At one point, she wrote she "surreptitiously" distributed hundreds of complaint cards to local bike shops to push the city into action.

Eugene volunteers have struggled for years to close streets for a major bike event in Eugene, but Birk and her colleagues jumped onboard, helping create, subsidize and remove obstacles for the Portland Bridge Pedal and Sunday Parkways events that have brought tens of thousands of riders, even closing lanes on a towering I-5 bridge to cars.

Where Eugene planners balk at removing car lanes or parking spaces to make safe space for bikes, Portland has often charged ahead.

Where Eugene's city manager system of government has often left entrenched, car-oriented bureaucrats in charge, Portland has responsive elected officials with real power to hire and back up innovators for quick change. **EW**

Birk chronicles the citizen ravings at public meetings and back-room obstinance of entrenched bureaucrats that must be overcome for cities to evolve.

cars," she said. "The media routinely slammed our efforts" to increase biking.

Birk loaded a bike cart with her slides and made suburban presentations to recruit more people to her cause. She often felt like an "alien," she said. "They would feel for their car keys." At each meeting, "Eighteen or 19 would run for their cars, but two or three would stay and talk to me," she said. "That's actually pretty good."

When the city quickly re-striped a four-lane road over a weekend to dedicate a lane for bikes, "businesses kind of went into shock," she said. But in the end, the businesses calmed down, she said. "Sometimes it's better to ask for forgiveness" than permission, Birk said. "Life goes on, change is hard and people freak out, but it's working."

Birk tells of the determination of Portland's bike facility planners. One colleague cornered an ODOT staffer in a bathroom to get him to sign a vital permit for Portland's floating riverfront bike path, she said.

An *Oregonian* editorial ridiculed the floating path as a waste that no one will use. But the paper soon admitted it was wrong about what's now one of the city's most popular attractions, according to Birk.

Birk said she helped the city grow from 70 bikeway miles to 300 in 15 years.

In 1996 she toured 18 European cities on a grant to learn cutting-edge bike design. But when she returned, she found

documenting biking success.

Portland helped spur success with a fun encouragement program, Birk said. "It was like come over here, this is where the party is."

After adding bridge bike lanes, "we've got an entire four-lane bridge in bike and pedestrian traffic." With increased cycling and improvements, "safety is improving radically," Birk said. Bike projects cost a tiny fraction of city road projects, "there is no better bang for the buck."

Cities like Portland and Eugene have some of the highest bike commuting rates in the U.S., Birk said. "But on the international scale we are not that good," she said. "We've just scratched the surface of what we can become."

One key may be more separate cycle tracks to protect bikes from car traffic like a recent downtown project in Vancouver, B.C., she said.

"At some point we're going to have to grapple with the cost of driving being heavily subsidized," she said, noting the carrot and stick approach in Europe. "The stick is making it really hard to drive and expensive."

Birk said a key to her success in Portland was the backing of the city's traffic engineer. "Without him," she said, the successes "wouldn't have been possible."

Determination also helped. Birk said she hired a private contractor to install colored bike lanes when a city maintenance manager balked. The city was also "spurred

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