

Burn Fat, Not Fuel!

By Molly Schaeffer
Wednesday, February 7, 2007

Cycling 6 miles to and from work instead of driving could burn 15 to 20 lbs. of fat each year.

Pollution Facts:

- 60% of car emissions pollution occurs in the first few minutes, before pollution control devices can work effectively.
- Approximately 40% of all car trips are less than 2 miles. Biking (10 minutes) or walking (30 minutes) instead of driving, would keep about 15 pounds of pollutants out of the air. (World Watch Institute)
- Motor vehicle emissions represent 31% of total carbon dioxide, 81% of carbon monoxide, and 49% of nitrogen oxides released in the U.S.

Fat Facts:

- In the U.S. 16% of children ages 6 to 19 years are overweight.
- In Holland 11% of children ages 7 to 11 years and 8% ages 13 to 17 years old are overweight.
- 64.5% of U.S. adults, age 20+ years old, are overweight and 30.5% are obese.

As a bicycle commuter and member of the Newton Bicycle Pedestrian Task Force, I have a strong personal interest in making Newton more "bicycle friendly". My co-workers echo the findings of a 1995 Rodale Press survey, which found that 40% of U.S. adults said they would commute by bike if safe facilities were available.

Recently I talked with Anne C. Lusk, Ph.D., Visiting Scientist at Harvard's School of Public Health, with 25 years of experience working with communities to create bicycle paths, including the Stowe (VT) Recreation path. She once bicycled 1000 miles from Boston to Washington, D.C. to explore the route for the East Coast Greenway. Dr. Lusk is writing a book, "Designing a Healthy America: Bicycle Paths, Parks, and Streets".

Dr. Lusk maintains that American communities should provide European Cycle Tracks so that cycling and walking could be part of the solution to the growing American obesity crisis. By separating vehicular traffic from pedestrian and bicycle traffic (and from other wheeled, non-motorized traffic such as in line skating), walking and cycling become safer and, therefore, viable, options for the entire community.

By building safer cycling facilities alongside, but separate from, roads, bicyclist fatalities were reduced by 64% in Germany and by 57% in Holland between 1975 and 2001. In the U.S. today, a bicyclist is twice as likely to be killed as a German bicyclist and over three times as likely to be killed as a Dutch bicyclist

Dr. Lusk maintains that American communities should provide European Cycle Tracks so that cycling and walking could be part of the solution to the growing American obesity crisis. By separating vehicular traffic from pedestrian and bicycle traffic (and from other wheeled, non-motorized traffic such as in line skating), walking and cycling become safer and, therefore, viable, options for the entire community.

Today children no longer ride bikes or walk to school and adults spend hard-earned money on memberships to gyms they drive to where they spend scarce time exercising instead of incorporating exercise into their daily routines. We drive everywhere and make many highly polluting short trips. Then we complain about the traffic. Many European countries explicitly chose to create and

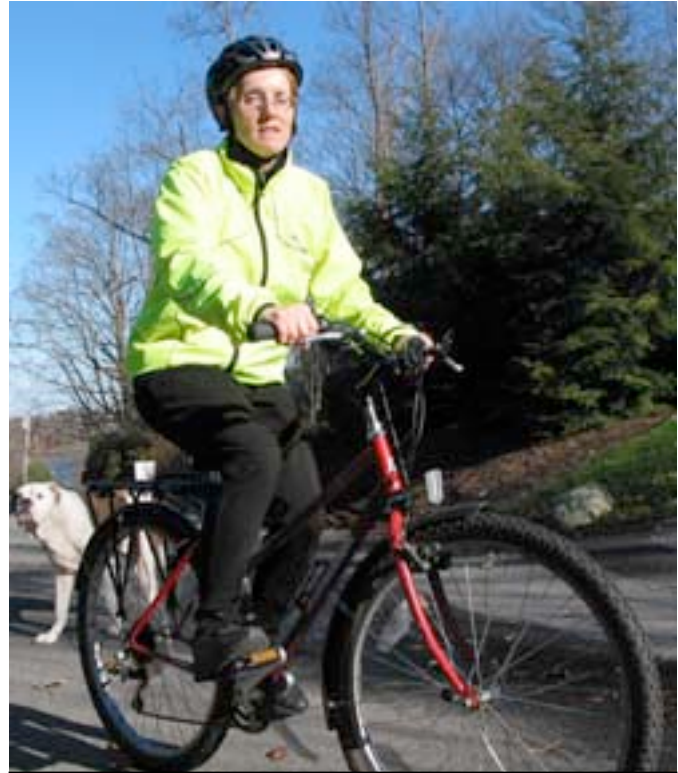
improve mobility opportunities for children and seniors in the 1970s. During the same time, the U.S. chose, instead, to provide more facilities for cars and trucks.

The development of bike paths does not happen spontaneously in an urbanized environment. It needs catalysts. The extremely popular Minuteman Bikeway from Cambridge to Bedford was a government project. It connects several local communities on an old railway bed that leads to a national park. In many communities, citizens have to organize at the grassroots level or local politicians have to lead the way to get things started.

In Newton, we already have a bike path along the Charles River. However, there are no safe connector paths to it, so cyclists need to ride in the street to get there, making it inaccessible to the vast majority of cyclists (children, senior citizens, occasional cyclists, those with impaired mobility) who are unable or afraid to ride on the road.

Dr. Lusk indicated that funding is available for creating cycling facilities, but that first there should be a consensus about what needs to be built, and where. She said: "The most far reaching thing would be to build European Cycle Tracks in Newton. You can't have a system with short sections of paths that aren't connected. You need an interconnected system for all people, not just fearless road cyclists. Pedestrians, vehicles and bikes should be separated."

How do we get started? According to Dr. Lusk, "It's easy to come together for a common cause, but people need to know that they can effect change. Even in



Molly Schaeffer

Chicago and New York they're doing bike things. Boston isn't doing 1/10th as much as Chicago.”

I can imagine European Style Cycle Tracks connecting Newton's Village Centers, the Charles River Bike Path, MBTA stations, schools, and on Beacon Street leading into Boston. Please share your ideas about this with the Task Force.

Molly Schaeffer, a Chestnut Hill resident, commutes to her job as a systems consultant on an aging Bridgestone bike. She can be reached at <mailto:mhschaeffer@alum.mit.edu>.