



Pedal Power: The German Experience

Think of Europe and cycling and what comes immediately to mind? The Tour de France, perhaps. Beyond that famed race, it might be an idyllic picture of Dutch children cycling through tulip-covered flatlands on the way to school. Or their parents pedaling peacefully along bike paths en route to a day at the office.

Easy for them, we say. Holland has long been the cycling capital of the world—some 30% of all urban travel trips in the country are covered by bike. But they've got flat terrain, high-density development, and a cycling culture. How could we hope to rival *their* stats?

To inspire action on this side of the Atlantic, we need another model—one more like our own. Take Germany, for example.

Lessons for Home

Dr. John Pucher, an urban transportation planner and professor at Rutgers University, has conducted research on transport policies in western Germany. He notes several obstacles they faced when striving for increased bicycle use in urban areas. These include:

- auto ownership levels among the highest in the world;
- extensive, high-quality roadways;
- high income levels (thus, no economic necessity to cycle for transport); and
- inclement weather—they get their share of rain, snow, and fog.

In spite of all this, the bicycle share of urban trips rose by 50% between 1972 and 1995 (to 12% of all trips).

Here at home, we face similar obstacles plus one more: average trip distances about 50% longer. But we shouldn't use these facts as excuses. With nearly half of all urban travel trips under five kilometres *and* bicycle travel making up less than 5% of the total, there's clearly room for improvement.

The German experience shows how to do it.

Promoting the Bike

The most successful German cities (Muenster, for example, boasts 32% of all trips by bicycle) use a variety of policies and practices, including:

- street networks with circuitous routing and dead ends for cars, but direct, fast routing for bicycles;
- special lanes at intersections that allow bikes to go to the front, plus "advance green" lights for cyclists;
- bus/bike lanes that exclude cars;
- good public facilities for bicycle storage, encouraging combined bicycle-public transit use;
- separate bike paths and an integrated system of bike routes for entire regions; and
- awards for firms supporting cycle commuting for their employees.

Curbing the Car

Municipal policies to curb the love affair with the automobile include:

"With the right set of public policies, bicycling can be increased almost anywhere."

- traffic-calming measures, such as 30 km-per-hour speed limits in residential areas, narrowing and curving streets, wider sidewalks, and physical barriers;
- a city-central network of streets that are off limits for cars; and
- auto parking made less accessible and more costly.

These local initiatives are complemented by national policies that make owning and driving a car about three times as expensive in Germany as it is in North America.

"The end result of all these policies," notes Dr. Pucher, "is to make auto use more expensive, more difficult, less convenient, and slower than it used to be."

What lesson does the German experience have for Canada? Says Dr. Pucher: "Bicycling can be increased even under quite unfavorable circumstances, provided the right public policies are implemented." The carrot-and-stick approach works best. This means combining policies that promote and support bicycle use *and* at the same time restrict auto use and increase its cost.

More Info ...

Pucher, J. (2000). Making walking and cycling safer: Lessons from Europe. *Transportation Quarterly*, 54 (3), 25–50.

Pucher, J., Komanoff, C., & Schimek, P. (1999). Bicycling renaissance in North America: Recent trends and alternative policies to promote bicycling. *Transportation Research*, 33A (7/8), 625–654.

Pucher, J. (1997). Bicycling boom in Germany: A revival engineered by public policy. *Transportation Quarterly*, 51 (4), 31–46.

Kicking the Car Habit

Here are two great resources to help promote pedal power:

■ **Divorce Your Car! Ending the Love Affair with the Automobile**, by Katie Alvord.

An excellent guidebook for individuals and for communities. Available from your local bookstore or direct from New Society Publishers, 1-800-567-6772 or www.newsociety.com

■ **Walk & Roll: A Guide to Active Transportation To, From and At the Workplace**.

Published by the Canadian Council for Health and Active Living at Work. Great for businesses, planners, health promotion professionals, etc. Available from Go for Green, (888) 822-2848 or www.goforgreen.ca (see also *Developing Communities for Active Transportation* from Go for Green).

