

Barbara Culp

MOST PEOPLE PROBABLY ASSUME that the logical extension of Washington State's strong coffee, eccentric people and evergreen forests is progressive politics. But Barbara Culp knows otherwise.

As executive director of the Bicycle Alliance of Washington, Culp knows from experience that virtually every effort in the state to turn railbeds into trails, no matter how short, is a lengthy, polarizing, symbolic, acrid battle.

Most recently Culp mobilized support for a 1.5-mile trail segment that would complete the 27-mile Burke-Gilman Trail, a rail-trail connecting Seattle to its suburbs via some of the Northwest's most scenic topography of sylvan hillsides and Edenic valleys. At a public hearing before the city council on whether to create the link through an industrial section of Seattle, more than 600 bike and trail advocates faced off against industrialists and other trail link opponents who were not in the mood for compromise.

Thanks to Culp's grassroots organizing, the trail advocates carried the day. Decades after its conception, the Burke-Gilman Trail soon will be whole.

By all accounts, Culp is eminently suited to fight these battles, because she combines passion for trails with logistical and leadership acumen. Her office is the first stop for many trail advocates seeking advice on both local and national issues.

"Barbara's an incredibly dedicated and talented person who's taken her group in new directions and added to our national efforts," says Randy Neufeld, chairman of the Thunderhead Alliance, a national bicycle advocacy group. He's worked with Culp on national advocacy projects, and

seeks her counsel on fundraising, publicity and marketing.

Culp, 54, was born in Twisp, a tiny town in north central Washington. Growing up in the shadow of the Cascades, Culp gained a love of nature and the trails that give humans access to some of its secrets.

Although her first love was horses, she recalls buying her first bike at age 6 from a neighbor for \$3. Her bicycle continued to be her primary mode of transportation at Western Washington University, where she studied sociology, and the car hasn't stood a chance since.

Tall and trim, Culp looks fresh and youthful, which is unsurprising given her years of bicycle commuting and touring. When she moved to Seattle, she began commuting by bike to her job as an event planner for a major bank downtown. There, she got her first taste of the logistical skills she would need as an advocate.

In the mid-1990s she became co-chair of the Seattle to Portland (STP) Ride, a massive job involving organizing 10,000 cyclists to travel 200 miles over two days. The event requires lining up corporate sponsors, engaging assistance from police and emergency authorities, obtaining extensive media exposure and enlisting hundreds of volunteers—all of which Culp managed with grace.

After a stint at the Cascade Bicycle Club, where she further honed her marketing and management skills, Culp was recruited by the Bicycle Alliance in 1998. During her time as executive director, membership has

First Stop for Trail Advocates

By J. Patrick Coolican

tripled to 2,200. Last year Culp helped raise more than \$300,000 for research, advocacy and programs to raise bike and trail awareness and help cyclists. Her efforts included grant writing, membership accrual and an auction that brought in \$50,000. Culp has added innovative programs, such as one guaranteeing members who bike to work a taxi ride in case of emergency. She's formed coalitions with Rails-to-Trails Conservancy and other groups that have helped bring victories for the Burke-Gilman Trail and the 31-mile Klickitat Trail in southern Washington. Playing the press like a country fiddle, Culp organizes creative events—including a May event when 100 cyclists and pedestrians joined giant puppets to cross the I-90 Bridge in Seattle in order to

demonstrate the importance of multi-modal transportation.

"Barbara's position requires getting help from lots of volunteers," says Alliance chairperson Cynthia Putnam. "They respect her, which means she can motivate them. She motivates her staff. She finds talent. And she brings us respectability."

Culp says she sees the bicycle as a legitimate mode of transportation, and an important alternative to the automobile. "This isn't my quote, but I'll use it," Culp quips: "Bicycles and pedestrians are an indicator species of a livable community." In other words, says Culp, you can measure "the quality of life in a community by how it treats its cyclists and pedestrians."

Culp also sees trails as an important ingredient of healthy communi-

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cyclists. "According to Washington State law, cyclists are vehicles with the same rights as cars," she says. To study the effectiveness of this principle, the Alliance recently won a research grant to examine how penalties for vehicular assault affect accident rates.

Nor does Culp demand of others what she won't do herself. She walks or cycles to work, walks to the grocery store and makes use of the miles of trails at nearby Seattle parks. She contrasts her independence from automobiles to the approach used by a neighbor who just moved into a recently built row house Culp describes as "garagitorian"—that is, dominated by a garage door. As Culp was peddling down the street to work one day, the neighbor was getting in her car to drive to a park many miles away to walk her dog.

When asked why any of this matters, Culp cites the obesity of the American population, car-induced pollution and a prevailing sense that Americans feel disconnected from their neighbors. Her solutions: more rail-trails, roads designed with more than cars in mind and more money for public transportation.

Despite her compelling arguments, at every turn Culp faces defenders of the status quo—local property owners willing to spend millions to prevent the completion of a rail-trail project in Seattle's suburbs; state politicians determined to use every dollar of transportation funds to increase automobile capacity; federal officials more concerned with tax cuts than with livable communities.

Her optimism undeterred, Culp gives a simple response: Using alternate forms of transportation "gives us fitness, helps the transportation problem and gives you all those great endorphins!"

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