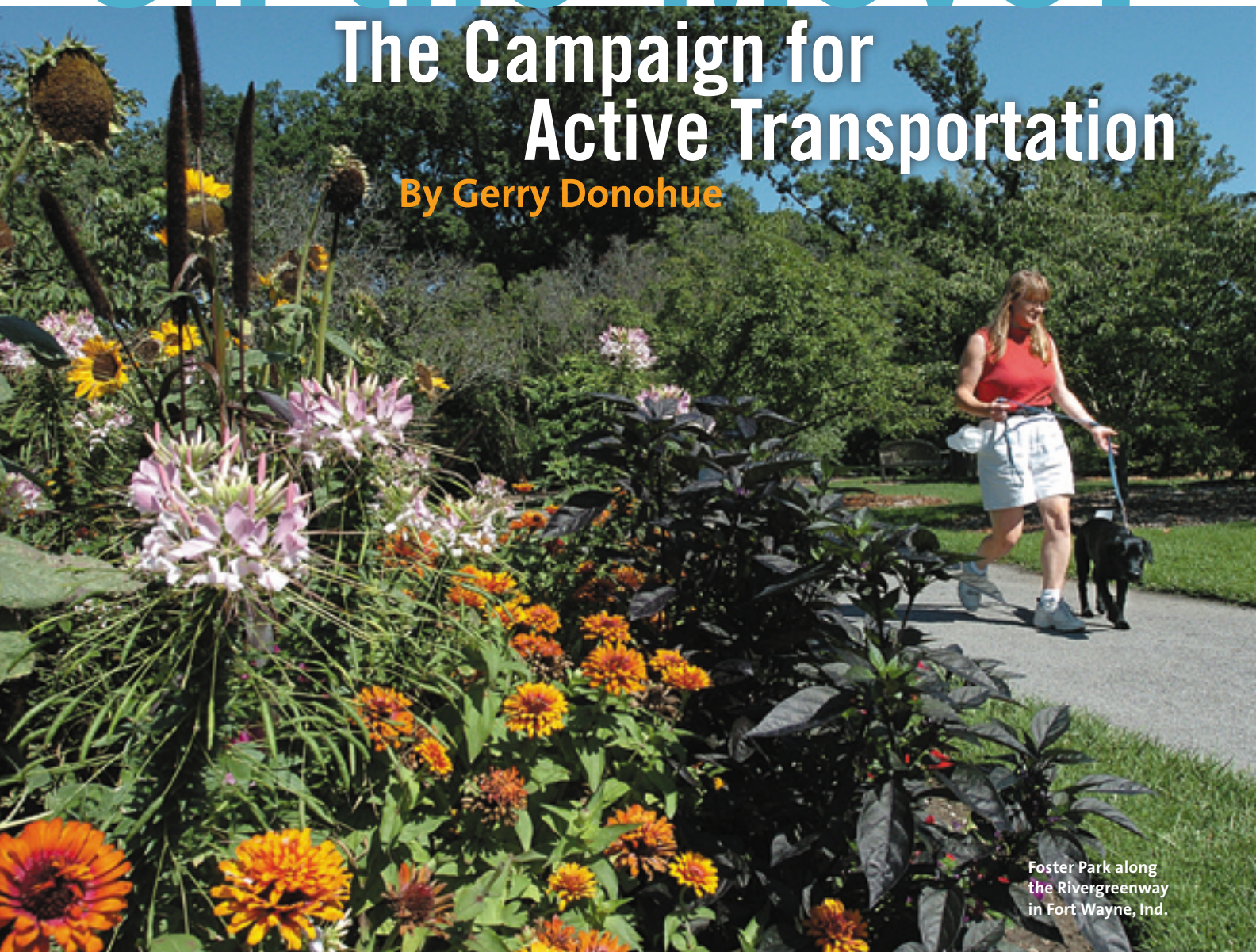


On the Move:

The Campaign for Active Transportation

By Gerry Donohue



Foster Park along
the Rivergreenway
in Fort Wayne, Ind.

With five feet of annual snowfall and fewer than 100,000 residents, Billings, Mont., hardly boasts the bicycle chic of Portland, Ore., or San Francisco. Baltimore's transportation infrastructure is built upon more than 300 years of history, and Fort Wayne, Ind., has the second-largest number of vehicles per capita in the country. Yet, these three cities, and more than four dozen other communities nationwide, are at the frontlines in the push for active transportation—getting around by walking and bicycling rather than by automobile.

“We’re tired of our over-reliance on single occupant vehicle use,” says Dawn Ritchie, Fort Wayne’s greenways manager. “By shifting vehicle trips to walking and biking, we will improve our health, our air pollution and our overall quality of life.”

Working through the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) Campaign for Active Transportation, these communities are assembling a strong and convincing argument for dramatically increasing federal funding for walking and bicycling infrastructure. Each community has created a case statement: a strategic plan for expanding and stimulating bicycling and walking at the local level—if federal funds were available.

For a long time, that’s been a big “if.” To date, the federal government has virtually ignored active transportation. For every \$100 the federal government spends on roads and highways, it allocates less than \$2 for bicycle lanes, multi-use paths and sidewalks.

That huge gap might finally start to close. On March 2, 2010, Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-Ore.) introduced the Active Community Transportation Act of 2010, which would provide an average of \$400 million per year in federal grants to communities to build and improve their bicycling and pedestrian infrastructure. RTC’s campaign was the catalyst for the bill.

“This bill would fulfill RTC’s aim to secure concentrated federal investments in completing active transportation systems that will make it safe and convenient for Americans to choose to walk or bicycle to work, school, errands and recreation,” says Kevin Mills, RTC’s vice president of policy.

Active transportation makes sense. Nearly half of all trips in this country—to the grocery store, the mall, a friend’s house—are less than three miles, a distance that could easily be completed on a bike in 20 minutes



BRUCE LARSEN



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Two runners on Fort Wayne’s Rivergreenway along the Maumee River; (inset) Darlene Tussing in Billings, Mont.

(often faster than by car, given ever-increasing congestion). A quarter of all trips are within a 20-minute walk. According to a recent RTC report, *Active Transportation for America*, merely raising walking and bicycling rates from the current 10 percent to 13 percent would lead to a reduction of 70 billion vehicle miles driven, cut greenhouse gas emissions by 3 percent and provide the recommended daily exercise for 50 million more Americans. The combined financial return from even such a modest increase in cycling and walking would be tens of billions of dollars annually.

Transportation truly does follow the “Build it and they will come” pattern. As our nation has invested disproportionately in roads for the past half-century, people are driving for even the shortest of trips. Similarly, when provided with opportunities to walk and bike, many will do so—thereby easing the burden on roads and maintenance for those who are driving. In Minneapolis, investments in urban trails and public transportation pushed bicycling and walking rates up to nearly 30 percent of trips, almost three times the national average.

Many communities nationwide are working toward similar improvements in their local bicycling and pedestrian infrastructure. To provide a sense of the current state of local efforts, here are snapshots of three distinct cities’ efforts to create healthy, vibrant communities through active transportation.

Billings, Mont.

When Billings put together its first active transportation plan in 1995, a centerpiece was funding the official city position of an Alternate Modes Coordinator (AMC) to implement and champion it.

“They recognized that we needed someone to get the plan off the shelf,” says Darlene Tussing, who has been the AMC since 1999.

Tussing focuses on mobilizing local and state groups and agencies. “We have to change people’s attitudes about bicycling and walking,” she says. “To make that happen, we need to get a lot of people involved.”

Three key groups in Billings are BikeNet, a local nonprofit that promotes and raises funds for bicycling and walking; the Health Alliance, a partnership of health care providers; and the local Chamber of Commerce.

As in so many communities, the biggest active transportation challenge is funding. Tussing has become adept at cobbling together funding from a wide variety of local, regional, state and federal programs. Because so many of these programs require matching funds, she spearheaded passage of a \$599,000 bond measure to provide local matching funds for the trail program. “I was literally walking the streets to get support for the measure to pass,” she says.

Billings has spent more than \$5.5 million in recent years building its trail network, which extends to 35 miles of hard-surface multi-use trails and five miles of bike lanes. One of the early rail-trail

projects, the Heights Bike Trail, extends six miles through the city.

Locals have responded. Since 2003, overall use on the trails has climbed 32 percent, and in a recent survey, nearly one-third of all Billings households had used the trail system at least once during the previous six months.

Billings' active transportation efforts focus on more than just infrastructure. The Billings Go Play! Campaign encourages biking and walking in the community. In addition to billboard displays, radio and television public service announcements and educational materials, Billings Go Play! hosts a number of events during the year. One of the most popular is the annual Sneaker, Spokes and Sparkplug Challenge, in which teams of bikers, walker/runners and motorists compete to determine which mode is the best and fastest for maneuvering through

downtown Billings. There have been three events so far. The runners won once, the bicyclists won twice, and the motorists lost every time.

Fort Wayne, Ind.

Fort Wayne has good reasons for aggressively building an active transportation infrastructure. Not only does Indiana's second-largest city have the second-largest number of vehicles per capita in the United States, but it has the eighth-highest rate of adult obesity.

"We no longer want to be considered one of the fattest cities in America," says Ritchie, who manages the city's active transportation efforts. "It's really a grassroots effort by our citizens. They want to see a mode shift."

In just the past 18 months, Fort Wayne has built eight miles of trails, installed its first bicycle lane, placed signs along a

6.5-mile bike route connecting several city neighborhoods, installed eight bike lockers at city hall and put in racks for 170 bicycles around the downtown area.

Fort Wayne has 53 miles of trails, with many of them radiating from the 23-mile Rivergreenway Trail that runs along the St. Joseph River. Ritchie says the city has plans for building an additional 300 miles of trails, 75 miles of bike lanes, 37 miles of wide curb lanes and 350 miles of shoulder lanes, along with transforming 22 miles of former railroad corridors into rail-trails.

"We have leadership at the top of the city that says this is an important investment we are making in our city," she says. "It's a quality of life issue, but there is also an economic development component."

The city has supported trail improvements and development with \$2.5 million in funding. The local parks board set aside \$1 million from a park bond to use for matching funds. Over a four-year period, Fort Wayne has used that money to bring in more than \$10 million in grants and donations.

An even more impressive bit of financial alchemy occurred in 2008 when the city's ABC affiliate was one of 90 TV stations around the country given \$10,000 in seed money from *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. The affiliate gave the money to four local trail groups. In just five weeks, grants and donations pushed the total to more than \$1.2 million. Winfrey featured Fort Wayne on her program as having raised more money than any other city, thereby winning her "Big Give" contest.



NATE EVANS



NATE EVANS

(Above) A shared bike and bus lane on Pratt Street was installed as part of the Charm City Circulator, a free shuttle in downtown Baltimore; (at left) cyclists enjoy the Baltimore waterfront.

Baltimore, Md.

Almost every Friday morning from 2007 to early 2010, Baltimore Mayor Sheila Dixon invited city residents to join her for a bike ride around the city to discuss and promote cycling. While Dixon has now left office, current city leadership continues to support an active transportation agenda.

Baltimore has long been a national leader in developing urban light rail. The city has built several successful

transit-oriented developments, in which retail, restaurants, entertainment and residences are clustered around transit stops. The next light-rail project, the Red Line Extension, will be the first to incorporate active transportation. Bicycles will be allowed on all the trains; stations will have bike racks; and the line will connect with both the Baltimore Waterfront Promenade and the Gwynns Falls Trail, a 20-mile trail that is the centerpiece of the city's trail network.

"We're looking to fully integrate bicycles with our transit system," says Nate Evans, bike and pedestrian planner in the Baltimore City Department of Transportation. "The city has a very strong interest in bringing cycling to the forefront."

Baltimore adopted a Bicycle Master Plan in 2006 that addresses all aspects of cycling as transportation, including redesigning city streets for bicycle use, creating a citywide network of bike facilities and encouraging safety education through community awareness.

Evans says the city is adding more than 50 miles of bike lanes, sharrows and routes throughout the city. The city's road resurfacing program, Operation Orange Cone, is required to incorporate bike facilities as space and safety allow. For example, bicycle-safe storm grates are installed for all resurfacing—and new—road projects.

In its case statement, the city has assembled a detailed budget showing how it would spend the federal funds, attaching specific dollar amounts to a vast range of projects, including new trails, trail connections, sustainability efforts and public outreach.

"With current environmental and economic trends, active transportation is a solution for every problem," says Evans. "But to fully improve our local environment, public health and traffic congestion, Baltimore needs the assistance of federal funds."

Gerry Donohue is a freelance writer and avid bicycle commuter based in Washington, D.C.

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