

# A Week of Biking Joyously

**On a fact-finding mission to the Netherlands, a delegation of California public officials marvel at the promise of bicycles for 21<sup>st</sup> Century transportation**

**By Jay Walljasper**

I joined a team of latter-day explorers in the Netherlands this month on a quest to discover what American communities can learn from the Dutch about transforming bicycling in the U.S. from a largely recreational pastime to an integral part of our transportation system.

Patrick Seidler, vice-chairman of the Bikes Belong Foundation [[link: www.bikesbelong.org](http://www.bikesbelong.org)], sponsor of this fact-finding mission for key decisionmakers from the San Francisco Bay Area, announced we were in search of the “twenty-seven percent solution”—the health, environmental, economic and community benefits gained in a nation where more than a quarter of all daily trips are made on bicycle.

Of course, the bicycle enjoys certain advantages in the Netherlands, notably a flat landscape and a long cycling tradition.

But the idea of learning from the success of the Dutch is not far-fetched. The Netherlands resembles the United States as a prosperous, technologically advanced nation where a huge share of the population owns automobiles. They simply don't drive them each and every time they leave home, thanks to common sense transportation policies where biking and transit are promoted as an attractive alternative to the car. Indeed, millions of Dutch commuters combine bike and train trips, which offers the point-to-point convenience of the automobile and the speed of transit.

Seidler noted that a delegation of public officials from Madison, Wisconsin returned home from a similar tour of the Netherlands last spring, and within three weeks was implementing what they learned on the streets of the city. Bikes Belong, a non-profit group dedicated to getting more people on bikes more often, regularly takes public officials on tours of cities where biking is popular.

My fellow explorers on this journey included the president of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors (city council) and the city's director of public works, chief traffic engineer and director of the livable streets program. From San Jose, come a city council member, the chief traffic engineer and representatives of the business community. Suburban Marin County was represented by city council members from San Rafael, Mill Valley and Corte Madera as well as a transit project director. Here is what we discovered in the world capital of biking.

## **Kids Just Wanna Ride Bikes**

The trip started in Utrecht, where our group marveled at the parade of bicyclists whizzing past us all over town. This raised an immediate question: Why is biking a way of life in the Netherlands and only a tiny portion of the transportation picture in United States?

We uncovered a large part of the answer that afternoon at a suburban primary school, where Principal Peter Kooy told us that 95 percent of older students—kids in the 10-12 age range—bike to school at least some of the time.

Compare that to the 15 percent who either walk or bike to school in the United States, down from 50 percent in 1970, according to the National Center for Safe Routes to School program [link <http://www.saferoutesinfo.org/>].

“I came to the Netherlands to have my mind blown about biking,” declared Damon Connolly, vice-mayor of San Rafael, California. “And that sure happened when I heard that 95 percent of kids bike to school.”

This helps explain the childhood obesity epidemic in the U.S., but also why so few adult Americans ride a bike to work or to do errands—a mere one percent of trips compared to 12 percent in Germany, 18 percent in Denmark, and 27 percent in the Netherlands.

A commitment to biking is not uniquely imprinted in the Dutch DNA. It is the result of a conscious push to promote biking that has resulted in a surge of cycle use since the 1970s.

And a large part of that success can be attributed to what happens in school. Kids learn how to bike safely as part of their education said Ronald Tamse, a Utrecht city planner who led our group on a two-wheel tour of the city and its suburbs.

A municipal program sends special teachers into the schools to conduct bike classes, and students go to Trafficgarden, a miniature city complete city with roads, sidewalks and busy intersections where students hone their pedestrian, biking and driving skills (in non-motorized pedal cars). At age 11, most kids in town are tested on their cycling skills on a course throughout the city, winning a certificate of accomplishment that ends up framed on many bedroom walls.

“To make safer roads, we focus on the children,” Tamse explained. “Because it not only helps them bike and walk more safely, but it helps them to become safer drivers who will look out for pedestrians and bicyclists in the future.”

These kinds of programs would make a huge difference in the United States, where 60 percent of people report in surveys they would like to bike regularly if they felt safer—but only eight percent actually do.

## **Squarely Addressing the Problems of Bike Safety & Theft**

Next stop was the Hague, where bikes account for 27 percent of all trips around the city of 500,000—exactly the average for the Netherlands as a whole. But not content with being merely average, the Hague is spending 10 million euros a year (roughly 14 million dollars) to improve those statistics.

Hidde van der Bijl, a policy officer for cycling in Hague’s city government, outlined their strategy about improving bicycle speed and safety: separating bike paths as much as possible from city streets and when that is not possible designating certain streets as bike boulevards where two wheelers gain priority over cars and trucks. The latter are known as bike boulevards in the U.S., and are being used in Portland, Berkeley, Minneapolis and other cities.

These are practical innovations that could make a dramatic difference in nearly every American town because research on this side of the Atlantic shows that physical separation from motorized traffic on busy streets is the single most effective policy that gets more people to bike.

But officials in the Hague realizing that fear about safety isn't the only thing that discourages people from riding bikes more frequently; that's why they are tackling the problems of bike parking.

This might seem a minor point to Americans cyclists who seldom find it hard to park bikes just a few steps from their destinations. But upon closer look, parking emerges as a significant issue for cyclists in any large city.

"The car is parked out in front of the house on the street, while the bike is stuffed away out back in a shed or they have to carry up and down the stairs in their buildings," van der Bijl explained. "So people choose the car because it is easier."

"It's an issue for me personally," agreed Ed Reiskin, San Francisco's director of public works, "because I always have to carry my bicycle down to the street."

People also worry about their bike being stolen off the street at their home or job. That's why creating more secure bike parking in residential neighborhoods, commercial districts and workplaces is a priority for Hague's transportation planners.

The city is busy building parking facilities in the basement of new office developments and at strategic outdoor locations throughout the center city, many of them staffed by attendants like a parking garage. You can park your favorite bike there for a nominal fee, confident that it will still be there when you return. (Groningen, the Netherlands biking capital with 59 percent of urban trips made on two wheels, debuted the first guarded parking facility in 1982 and now sports more than 30 in a town of 180,000.)

Meanwhile in high density residential neighborhoods, the city is installing bike racks or special bike sheds to make life easier for two-wheel commuters, sometimes taking over auto parking spaces to do it. One parking space can be converted to 10 bike spaces, according to van der Bijl.

## **Something Hopeful in Rotterdam**

On our third day in the Netherlands, we biked across the Atlantic—at least it felt that way in Rotterdam, a city whose streets seemed almost American. We came face-to-face with familiar road conditions: heavy traffic on 4-lane roads with aggressive drivers.

Bob Ravasio, a Marin County realtor and city council member in the town of Corte Madera, quipped "Utrecht seems like a fantasy land now. This is what we're up against at home."

Rotterdam heightened our optimism about boosting biking in the U.S. when we learned that 22 percent of trips around town each day are made on bicycles—below average among Dutch cities but more than double the rate of any major American city. If they could do, some could we.

"Rotterdam could be San Francisco or Oakland with more bikes," observed Damon Connolly.

Even more encouraging was the news from Tom Boot of the city's planning department that Rotterdam has been increasing its share of bike traffic by 3 percent annually for the last several years. They've achieved this phenomenal growth by expanding and improving the network of bikeways—separating them from car traffic whenever possible and coloring the asphalt bright red everywhere else to clearly mark bike lanes for motorists to see.

“Good things are happening here,” observed Bruno Maier, vice-president of Bikes Belong, “and you can really envision it happening back home.”

## **Amsterdam’s New Neighborhood Where Bikes are the King of the Road**

The experience of biking through four Dutch cities provided our team of Bay Area transportation leaders with plenty of examples of what they can do to make cycling more safe, popular and pleasurable back home. Bridget Smith, for instance, director of San Francisco’s Livable Streets Program, is excited about using more color on the roadways as an inexpensive but dramatic way of making sure everyone can tell bike lanes from car lanes.

But the experience also fueled our imaginations about the future of cities. We saw one glimpse of what’s possible on Java Island, a cluster of neighborhoods constructed over the past 10 years in what was once the city’s harbor. It’s a scenic waterfront location with strikingly handsome modern architecture in a pleasing variety of styles that is linked to the rest of the city by tram, road, and bike paths. Although brand new, it exudes a charm reminiscent of the city’s famous canal neighborhoods—which for my money are one of the most vibrant and downright pleasing urban quarters on earth.

Like old Amsterdam, Java Island enjoys a picturesque waterfront setting. But it shares another trait with the city’s medieval districts that you would never expect in a newly built housing development—it accommodates bicycles more easily than cars. Motorized traffic is shunted to the side of each cluster of apartment buildings in underground parking garages, while pedestrians and bicyclists have free reign of the courtyards that link people’s homes like a green commons.

This result of this visionary planning is more than just lovely—Java Island represents a bold new vision of urban life where people matter more than motor vehicles. You feel a liberating sense of ease moving about these new neighborhoods—and so do the residents. I’ve never seen kids—even really young ones—who look so completely comfortable running around their neighborhoods, not even during my own childhood in the days before autos completely ruled the road. We passed two sets of young girls staging tea parties, one of them taking place on a blanket just inches from the joint biking/walking trail that served as the neighborhood’s main street.

Pascal van den Noort, executive director of the transportation organization Velo Mondial leading our tour through the city, urged the group to “imitate this in California, please.”

Amsterdam city council member Fjodor Molenaar, who met up with us on Java Island, explained that the Dutch call this an “Auto Luw” development, which translates as “car light” or “car sparse,” adding that this planning idea is now the official policy of the city.

To get a sense of how it feels to bike in the Netherlands, here is video that Molenaar recommended to us at a meeting the next day with city transportation officials at the mayor’s residence. It’s a trailer for a new movie called “Riding Bikes With the Dutch” in which filmmaker Michael W. Bauch chronicles his family’s adventure swapping homes with a family in Amsterdam.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yU5ScmJrp1c>

## **Bringing It All Back Home**

After five days of biking around Dutch cities, the Bay Area delegation was fired up about the potential of bicycling to improve life in American cities. On our last day, after a lengthy jaunt through

Amsterdam—covering medieval and modern neighborhoods, rich and poor ones, all full of bikers—we dismounted for one last discussion at an outdoor café overlooking the waterfront. The next day most of us would be headed back to our homes and jobs and cars in the U.S., where most people would dismiss the idea of bikes making up a quarter of urban traffic as “science fiction.”

One question popping up all over the group was how we reconcile our amazing experience of biking in the Netherlands with the auto-choked streets of San Francisco, San Jose and Marin County? But as Hillie Talens of C.R.O.W. (a transportation organization focusing on infrastructure and public space) reminded us, it took the Dutch 35 years to construct the ambitious bicycle system we were now enjoying. In the mid-1970s biking was at a low point in the country and declining fast. Even Amsterdam turned to an American for a plan to rip an expressway through its beautiful central city. But the oil crises of that time convinced the country that they needed to lessen their dependence on imported oil.

The Dutch gradually turned things around by embracing a different vision for their cities. While the country’s wealth, population and levels of car ownership have continued to grow through the decades, the share of trips made by cars has not. We could accomplish something similar in the United States, by enacting new plans to make urban cycling safer, easier and more convenient.

Following the Dutch model will make biking mainstream in America. The morning and evening rush hour of cyclists you see on the streets in the Netherlands are not all the young, white, male ultrafit athletes in spandex we are accustomed to seeing in the U.S.—people of all ages and income levels use bikes for everyday transportation, with women biking more than men.

Of course, we won’t do everything the same as the Dutch— there are considerable differences between the two countries geographically, politically and culturally. This was reflected in the questions our team posed to the numerous transportation experts we met during the week. *Where did you find the money to do that? How did you overcome the opposition of motorists, merchants, developers etc.?*

And, inevitably , American ingenuity will envision solutions the Dutch, the Danish, the Germans or the Chinese never thought of.

But the Netherlands does offer plenty of practical ideas to get started, as well as the inspiration of seeing a place where bikes have gained their rightful role as a form of transportation. Sitting on the sunshine with a chilly breeze blowing off the harbor (this was the first day we were not rained upon at least once while biking—one advantage most American cities have over Dutch ones), each member of the group shared thoughts of what they’d learned. Here is a selection of the comments:

**David Chiu, president of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors (city council):**

“It’s one thing to read statistics about the Dutch biking at ten times the rate we do in the U.S. It’s another thing to see it happening; not just for hard-core bicyclists but as an everyday way of life for the majority of citizens.

“There is actually a road map of do-able public policies we can adopt to get us where the Dutch are today.”

**Sam Liccardo, San Jose City Council:**

“We can start by identifying a few corridors that serve many workplaces and have a high transit-dependent population and build them out with bicycle infrastructure.

“We can brand biking as cool, make it hip—and get the bicycling community coming out to meetings to support these improvements.”

**Shiloh Ballard, vice-president of the Silicon Valley Leadership Group (a business and civic organization):**

“What we can immediately take back home is their general planning for bikes; for instance, all the visual clues that tell motorists to look for bicycles.”

**Ricardo Olea, chief traffic engineer, city of San Francisco:**

“I understand better all the passion people have about biking—people who want to see a bike system like the Netherlands in their lifetime.”

**Manuel Pineda, deputy director for the San Jose Department of Transportation:**

“I realized that politics is the same everywhere you go; they faced some of the same issues here that we do.

“We can concentrate on two or three corridors that can be a showcase that gets people excited, to get thing going, to show what’s possible.”

**Ed Reiskin, director of public works, City of San Francisco**

“They don’t just think about bikes, every presentation we heard tied things together—public transit, parking, cars, streets. The Dutch sense that people are going to do what’s easiest. If we think about how to improve the quality of biking, more people will bike.”

**Bridget Smith, director of Livable Streets Program, city of San Francisco:**

“I see what can be accomplished with a vision. All I’ve learned here will infuse my work for a long time.”

**Damon Connolly, vice-mayor of San Rafael:**

“What I will be thinking about when I get home is how closely related land use planning is to transportation planning—they are almost the same thing.”

**Bob Ravasio, city council member in Corte Madera:**

“The low-hanging fruit is getting people start with short trips—to the store, not commuting all the way from Marin County to San Francisco.”

**Bill Gamlen, senior rail engineer, Sonoma Marin Area Rail Transit:**

“We need to build the infrastructure, get quality bike routes going like the Star Routes in Rotterdam.”

**Ian Dewar, advocacy manager for Specialized Bicycles, based in San Jose:**

“I was really, really surprised by the low number of bike accidents they have here. The education they do really pays off.”

**Zach Vanderkooy, program coordinator for Bikes Belong:**

“The Dutch are not somehow exceptional people when it comes to biking. Everything we see here is the result of a deliberate decision to improve biking here. Even little things, like paint on the street, adds up.”

**Kate Scheider, research analyst and communications coordinator for Bikes Belong:**

“I see the importance of more investment in research and data on bicycling at the national level.”

**Bruno Maier, vice-president of Bikes Belong:**

“Imagine if all the bikes we saw in the Netherlands were single-occupancy vehicles. It would not be the same place.”

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