

Gridlock 2020

ANDY CLARKE

It will not shock most readers to discover that cyclists feel as if the Transportation 2020 process has passed them by. The attempts to reach consensus on a transportation policy and funding mechanism for the next century have, despite our best efforts, ignored (except for the occasional cursory consideration) an important means of transportation and one of the solutions to the many problems that beset our current system.

As one of the growing number of bicycle commuters in the United States, however, I have a much more serious problem with the attempts of AASHTO, the Transportation Alternatives Group, and most other relevant groups that are seeking to identify transportation objectives that will guide us into the 21st century.

Mobility Versus Accessibility

First, much has been written about the need to improve mobility. AASHTO's *The Bottom Line* devotes a special section to "the value of mobility" and elsewhere comments that "America is dependent upon mobility." Unfortunately, less attention has been paid to accessibility, and the difference between these two goals is not merely a matter of semantics. Mobility means the ability to move around. Access, on the other hand, means that people can move around and actually get somewhere.

Concentrating all our attention on mobility means that a trip has become an end in itself, and that the longer the trip, the better because the person has become more mobile. It matters not that the purpose of a 10-mile trip is exactly the same as that of a 5-mile journey.

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Underpinning this choice of mobility over accessibility seems to be a denial of the fact that every trip made imposes costs, both on the user and on society. The aim of a sound transportation policy—in combination with land-use planning—should be to lower these costs. This change will require a reduction in the number and length of trips that people have to make. Were this goal to be achieved, cycling (and walking, which gets an even worse deal from the Transportation 2020 process) would become an even more important component of the transportation system.

Cycling Opportunities

In its most recent proposals, the South Coast Air Quality Management District explicitly realizes this objective. It will be difficult, with the existing infrastructure in Los Angeles, to turn cycling and walking into practical, attractive alternatives, but it could be done. For example, any new transit system must incorporate good bicycle access and parking provisions so that cycling (ideal for trips up to 5 miles in length) can be combined with transit (which is often not viable in areas of low-density land use). Japanese, German, and Swiss cities benefit from such integration policies, and a recent survey of users of Washington, D.C., Metro "Park and Ride" facilities in Fairfax County, Virginia, revealed that 25 percent of them would consider bicycling if access and parking were improved.

Cyclists also like to have space on the roads to ride in comfort, and this factor must be considered when roads are built, "improved," or simply resurfaced. What extra lane widths are actually required, and could just a bit of extra space be created in the curb lane? During the 1980 New York City transit strike, temporary 6-foot-wide bike lanes

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were carrying as many as 4,000 cyclists per hour, an impressive "passenger miles traveled" figure for that much road space.

Reducing trip lengths, however, is only half the story. Figures from the Motor Vehicle Manufacturers Association reveal that 54 percent of the population already live 5 or fewer miles from work. The vast majority of the nation is quite capable of riding a bicycle this distance, and most have no objective reason for not using a bicycle. German research has demonstrated a potential to transfer 25–35 percent of urban trips from car to bicycle, and in 1980, the U.S. Department of Transportation noted the potential for moving from a 1975 base of 475,000 bicycle commuters to about 3.2 million. The figure currently stands at about 2.7 million.

Freedom of Choice

One of the reasons that more people do not cycle is that motoring is made as easy as possible, to the detriment of most other modes. This blatant inequity highlights the second fundamental difference of opinion that I have with those involved in "planning" for the future. That the private automobile extends personal freedom and freedom of choice is a much-vaunted belief of those seeking to provide for our mobility. There is no doubt that having an automobile in the United States today enables people to do many things. As a nonmotorist I am well aware that my freedom to do things and go places is seriously diminished. For me, there is no choice—either I get a car, or I accept that there are a host of things I cannot do.

That is not freedom. In Europe, I always felt that I could choose how I traveled from Point A to Point B. The option exists of using the most suitable means of transportation for any particu-

lar trip. Short trips, under 2 or 3 miles, can be made by foot or bicycle on streets and roads that are safe and attractive enough to encourage it. Longer trips can be made by a good, efficient public transportation network, often in combination with bicycling. Intercity trips can be made either by car or by rapid, reliable trains that run frequently throughout the day and into the night.

Long, multipurpose trips, perhaps with children or by people with disabilities, are best made by car—and they can be. Because so many others are using different modes, the roads are not hopelessly jammed, and parking places can be found.

Give people a fair choice and I believe that they will exercise it sensibly. If tax breaks for those using public transportation and bicycles were equivalent to those enjoyed by people provided with free parking and generous mileage allowances (to mention just two hidden subsidies); if bicycle parking facilities were required at all developments (as they are in communities such as Palo Alto, California, and Gainesville, Florida, where bicycle parking can be substituted for required car spaces); and if major roads had wide curb lanes or bicycle lanes to allow the lane to be shared—*then* cycling would really be an option.

Congestion, pollution, and other problems piling up on U.S. roads are there because the United States has become a slave to the automobile. There is no alternative—and none is being offered by AASHTO or others. Instead, they want the United States to try to build its way out of trouble—proposing 176,000 miles of new urban lanes, for example, at a time when widening and improving 3 miles of Chicago's Dan Ryan Expressway will cost \$210 million—and in the process make the automobile even more indispensable. This policy will cost the nation dearly

both in the short and the long term because it is simply not sustainable. Nations with strong economies, such as the Netherlands and Switzerland, are actively pursuing substantial reductions in private automobile trips, instead of assuming an inexorable rise in vehicle miles traveled.

Readers may dismiss all of this as being anti-automobile, or perhaps words of envy from someone without a car. To do so would be convenient but untrue. I am not an angry environmentalist opposed to the use of cars, but I am opposed to the excessive, unnecessary use—or abuse—of them. What makes me angry is that as a cyclist using a highway system valued at \$500 billion (by the Transportation Alternatives Group), I still have to look out for drainage grates that face the wrong way, wait at traffic signals that don't detect bicycles, negotiate dreadful pavement surfaces, and fight for every parking space and every inch of road space provided.

Cyclists do feel left out, and worried. Transportation 2020 offers little comfort for the future because the doubling of travel demand by the year 2020 is accepted as inevitable, without comment. If it is inevitable, it is because cycling, walking, transit, land-use planning, environmental concerns, and common sense are all being ignored, marginalized, or both.