BEYOND THE BACKLASH:
EQUITY AND PARTICIPATION IN BICYCLE PLANNING.
BEYOND THE BACKLASH: Equity and Participation in Bicycle Planning

May 2011

AUTHORS:
Max Applebaum
Andrew Camp
Conor Clarke
Joe Delia
Jennifer Harris-Hernandez
Sungbae Park
Brian Paul
Scott Richmond
Sam Stein
Matthew Wallach
Sung Hoon Yoo

EDITORS:
Andrew Camp
Conor Clarke
Brian Paul

UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF:
Tom Angotti, PhD
and Eva Tessza Udvarhelyi

HUNTER COLLEGE
Department of Urban Affairs & Planning

BEYOND THE BACKLASH: Equity and participation in bicycle planning.
About the Authors

We are a group of eleven graduate students from the Urban Affairs and Planning Program at Hunter College. This report on bicycle planning in New York City is the culmination of a yearlong research project. As part of our coursework towards attaining Masters degrees in Urban Planning, we took on endless hours of research, conducted countless interviews, and developed and debated ideas at weekly meetings throughout the year. This report, however, would not have been possible without the assistance of many people outside of our group.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the gracious staff at the Department of Transportation (DOT), namely John Orcutt and Hayes Lord, for providing us with vital information regarding the needs of the Bicycle Program that steered our research from the outset. Michael Amabile later gave us helpful information on how to integrate our research with current DOT projects, and, with Willa Ng, also shared perspectives on effective community-based bicycle planning techniques. We would also like to thank other DOT staff persons that attended our mid-project status presentation, grilling us with important questions and providing valuable feedback.

Thanks also to those individuals who generously shared their time, lending their expertise and insight, which were vital in shaping our understanding of the background and context of bicycle planning in New York. We thank:

Paco Abraham
Pasqualina Azzarello
Julissa Bisono
Jack Brown
Chris Brunson
Doris Cruz
Anna Dioguardi
Bill DiPaola
Naomi Doerner
Mike Epstein
Joseph Femenia
Lewis A. Fidler
Maura Fitzpatrick
Scott Giering
Jessame Hannus
Kristen Jones
Laura MacNeil
John Mattera
Karen Nieves
Caroline Samponaro
Jack Schmidt
Lacey Tauber
Valeria Treves
Paul Steely White

We thank the volunteers who assisted us in translating our research materials into three languages, including Han Mei Jiang, Maurizio Leandro and Pengfei Li. Without these materials we would not have been able to communicate with those who participated in our surveys and focus groups, whom we also thank. Thanks also to the Flushing branch of the Queens Library, and Make the Road in Corona for donating space so that we could convene focus groups and conduct surveys.

Finally, we are grateful for the guidance of Professor Tom Angotti and his teaching assistant Eva Tessza Udvarhelyi, both of whom provided us with valuable focus and direction.
This report is the culmination of a yearlong research project, working with the New York City Department of Transportation (DOT) Bicycle Program to recommend improvements to the planning, implementation and location of bicycle infrastructure in New York City. Our recommendations are designed primarily for DOT and the Bicycle Program, but also speak to the city at large, as it strives for a more livable and sustainable urban environment. As progressive transportation planners, we begin with the assumption that bicycle infrastructure is a positive addition to the city’s streetscape. Bicycling promotes physical health, eases congestion on roads and public transit, increases mobility, and improves air quality. Therefore, this studio focused on determining how cycling infrastructure in New York City can best serve the needs of current and future cyclists, and how its longevity can be secured into the future.

The Hunter College bicycle studio performed extensive research on the history and best practices of bicycle planning. We interviewed cycling activists, community board members, and transportation experts in New York City, and examined the history of bicycle advocacy and infrastructure in the city as far back as the opening of the nation’s first bicycle lane on Ocean Parkway in 1896. We also reviewed the academic literature on cycling, as well as transportation plans from other major cities. Most importantly, we developed a comprehensive needs-based methodology to determine New York City’s infrastructure needs.
Sustaining Bicycle Planning in NYC

Bicycling is booming in New York City. According to official DOT counts, commuter cycling increased by 88 percent between 2007 and 2010. Over 250 new miles of bicycle lanes have been installed under current DOT commissioner Janette Sadik-Kahn, providing many New Yorkers with the option of a more sustainable and active mode of transportation. While we fully support cycling in New York, two issues have emerged as the development of new infrastructure has proceeded over the last few years. These two issues frame the research and recommendations of this report, and include:

- The lack of infrastructure in traditionally underserved areas outside of the core of Manhattan and northwest Brooklyn.

- The vulnerability of this new infrastructure in light of incomplete transportation planning processes involving city agencies (including DOT), community boards, and other community and advocacy organizations.

The Bicycle Network: An Issue of Transportation Justice

- New bike lanes and parking facilities are largely concentrated in lower Manhattan and northwestern Brooklyn, and are oriented toward central business district (CBD) commuters. This infrastructure excludes large numbers of cyclists in the outer boroughs, who bicycle within their neighborhoods or to transit stops, or who use their bicycles for work.

The design and development of the bicycle network now places a strong emphasis on commutation to the CBD from northwest Brooklyn and other parts of Manhattan, as is evident from the concentration of bicycle lanes in these neighborhoods. This emphasis on CBD commutation is also reflected in current data collection practices by DOT. Cyclists are counted at Whitehall Ferry Terminal, the East River Bridges, and at each of the avenue intersections along Manhattan’s 50th Street. Counts at these locations provide a picture of CBD commuter cycling, but omit the thousands who bicycle entirely within the outer boroughs.

This emphasis on CBD commuters raises issues of transportation justice. Transportation justice is the concept that transportation infrastructure should aim to equally and equitably
address the needs of all people, regardless of economic class, race, sex, age, ability or any other kind of social distinguisher. New York City’s bicycle network is currently most built out in the city’s wealthiest neighborhoods. Low-income cyclists, however, make up a large part of the urban bicycling constituency. These cyclists are concentrated in Queens, the Bronx, and outer Brooklyn. Many of these individuals rely on cycling because they live in neighborhoods poorly served by mass transit. Residents of northern Queens often must travel more than a mile to get to their closest subway stops, while the neighborhoods where most cycling infrastructure is currently located have the best transit access in the city. In order to serve the people of New York who need it most, the bicycle network must expand its focus.

Community Participation and Institutional Vulnerability

- The increase in bicycling and bicycle infrastructure has produced an emotional backlash. The backlash is attributable to numerous sources, from the structure of community boards to an ingrained culture of driving. While some opponents may never be placated, part of the opposition could be diffused by improvements to the community outreach and involvement process followed by DOT.

Misconceptions have grown around the proliferation of bicycle lanes and streetscape changes that have been implemented over the last five years. The backlash against bicyclists represents a perfect storm of class relations. As areas of the city gentrify, many long-time New Yorkers fear for the stability of their neighborhoods, and perceive cyclists to belong to one of two threatening classes: people who are richer than them (“white yuppies in spandex”); and people who are poorer than them (commercial cyclists, immigrants, people of color and punks). This “donut-hole theory” suggests that middle class citizens are furious with the city for helping everyone around them, while seeming to ignore their outer borough auto- and transit-oriented needs.

This framing of cyclists and city agencies ignores many inconvenient truths: bicycle ridership is representative of all social strata of New York City; street infrastructure improvements often enhance safety and public spaces for all New Yorkers, not just those who cycle; bicycling has been an important part of New York City residents’ commutation patterns since the early 19th century; implementing bicycle lanes costs far less than building or maintaining streets for cars and transit systems; and finally, the city is not prioritizing the needs of low-income people of color over the white middle class.
Regardless of the source of the opposition, bicycle lanes must have genuine citizen support if they are to remain a part of the city’s transportation landscape into the coming decades. This necessitates improving relationships between DOT and New York City’s community boards (CBs), which are the primary vehicle for public participation in the city. While CBs have no official power over the city streets, opposition by some boards has proven decisive in derailing the expansion of the citywide bicycle network. Their approval can dramatically impact the way bicycle infrastructure is received in a community. In many cases, however, opposition to bicycle lanes fails to recognize the large numbers of cyclists in these communities.

PROPOSALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Methodology for Counting Cyclists and Assessing Needs

A critical first step in recognizing the needs of all cyclists in the city is to expand the methods used to determine need and count cyclists. The methodology we propose is based on identifying previously uncounted cyclists and their cycling needs. The results inform our recommendations concerning network design and facility location. The following steps detail the methodology, which we developed and tested in Flushing, Queens in late 2010 and early 2011:

- **Spot Count** — Brief counts lasting 15 minutes give a rough picture of cycling in each neighborhood. The counts should include cyclists’ gender, their approximate age, which direction they are riding, and which routes are taken.

- **Windshield Survey** — A windshield survey is a simple tour of an area, either on foot, by bicycle, or by car, to observe cyclist habits and bicycle infrastructure. The primary purpose is to determine how many cyclists are in an area and where they are concentrated. We recommend focusing on areas around transit stations, libraries, retail districts, hospitals, and other major trip generators.

- **Focus Group** — In the interest of collecting qualitative cycling data, we recommend conducting focus groups. The goal should be to attract a broad range of cyclists in order to learn about cycling conditions, cyclists’ opinions on bicycle infrastructure, and which types of infrastructure they need most. Focus groups are resource-intensive, and we do not expect DOT to conduct one for every project. We
found that a greater volume of data, albeit quantitative in nature, can be collected with the use of surveys, which require significantly less resources to implement.

- **Survey** — The centerpiece of our methodology is the handlebar survey. We recommend the distribution of at least 300 surveys per neighborhood. They should be written in the native languages of the residents of the neighborhood (for example, English, Spanish, and Chinese in Flushing) to ensure that a diverse array of cyclists will be able to respond. Our survey’s 20 questions asked people why they choose to ride, how long their trips last, what types of safety equipment they use, which streets they perceive to be the most dangerous, and what kinds of infrastructure would be most beneficial for them. The survey also included a map of the area, on which respondents were asked to draw their routes.

**Bicycle Network Design Recommendations**

Our application of this methodology in Queens has lead us to propose two important changes in the design and planning of the city’s bicycle network. These changes address the equity of bicycle infrastructure distribution in New York, and the benefits of an intermodal approach to transportation planning.

- **Build Neighborhood-Based Networks**

  Our research shows that there are three principal types of cyclists in Flushing, Corona, and Jackson Heights: commuters riding to and from transit hubs, workers riding within the neighborhood to and from work, and messengers riding according to their delivery routes. These results show that DOT—in partnership with community boards and local advocacy groups—has an opportunity to build neighborhood-based bicycle networks that correspond to the most frequently used routes, ensuring that infrastructure matches local needs.

- **Create Transit Connectivity**

  Our study’s most significant finding was the existence of demand for bike racks on and around the 7 train subway corridor in Queens. The number of bicycles parked in this area, and the number of survey respondents who said they rode to the subway...
shows that there is a significant unrecognized need for bicycle connectivity and parking in and around transit stations. Commuters indicated their need and desire to cycle to subway and train stations, safely leave their bicycles at these transit hubs, commute to their jobs, and then return to cycle home.

Community Involvement and Community Board Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on research into New York City’s community boards and their working relationships with DOT. We found that the lack of resources provided to community boards is a major impediment to their effective engagement with transportation plans. We also found that CBs often fail to recognize the need for cycling infrastructure in their districts, even where there is a large quantity of cyclists. These factors have made community boards a frequent impediment to the installation of bicycle infrastructure.

The Department of Transportation’s relationship with CBs is one that is best described by two related sets of power dynamics. First, CBs are advisory bodies and have no power to set or veto policy decisions set by local government. Secondly, DOT has no legal or institutional obligation to meet with CBs. In the past, these dynamics have fostered conflict between CBs and DOT when they sought to implement new bicycle projects. In recent years, however, DOT has intensified its outreach to community boards and stated on many occasions its interest in fostering a good working relationship with CBs and their constituents. Such a relationship will improve the chances that a CB will work with DOT toward the implementation of future projects, rather than regard DOT as a hostile outside force. We have assembled a series of recommendations to make this outreach more effective.

While we stress that community boards have the right to be consulted and participate in planning for bicycle infrastructure, they do not and should not have the right to veto or impede the design and implementation of safer streets throughout New York City. Community boards have a clear responsibility to plan for the rights of all users of the street. This responsibility should be explicitly outlined for every community board and transportation committee. If not clarified, increased community board participation will contradict the goal of creating a just transportation network.
• **Establish a public and standardized review process**

The current community board notification process is not widely understood, contributing to the mistrust of the Bicycle Program among CBs. A written notice of any proposed bicycle project should be issued six months in advance of scheduled installation. This will make it clear that DOT seeks community involvement, and will provide a predictable process through which community boards can provide input. This will also ensure that DOT is able to present the rationale behind a project before it comes to a vote.

• **Demonstrate a local need for bicycle infrastructure.**

When presenting a new project to a community board, DOT has often encountered the argument that it is unnecessary for that particular neighborhood. The methodology described in this report shows who is cycling in a community, and which routes they use. This data can be used to assist DOT and community boards in their determination of the bicycle infrastructure needs of particular districts.

• **Develop an integrated transportation plan for each neighborhood that provides the context for increased bicycle infrastructure.**

The Department of Transportation’s efforts to build out the bicycle network have been frustrated by opposition in some community boards. Several CBs have complained that DOT ignores longstanding transportation needs in their communities in the interest of building bicycle projects. We suggest that DOT present its cycling projects in the context of multimodal plans for improvement.

DOT has challenged the longstanding dominance of the road by cars with a vision of Complete Streets, the physical redesign of our roadways to serve pedestrians, bicyclists, and buses, as well as the private automobile. Complete Streets should go beyond the design of the actual roadway to take into consideration transit connectivity and the location of trips. Bicycle projects will also be more palatable to CBs as part of comprehensive transportation plans that serve the needs of all community residents.
• Support community board transportation committees with time, information, and technical assistance.

Community boards do not have the resources to hire professional planners, even though they are tasked with evaluating plans, Environmental Impact Statements, traffic analyses, and other complex technical documents created by land use consultants. The city should provide all board members with regular trainings on relevant issues, including multi-modal transportation planning. Additionally, CBs should be furnished with the necessary tools to conduct transportation analysis, such as geographic information systems programs. Such assistance could encourage broader thinking about planning issues, including the role of cyclists and cycling infrastructure in every neighborhood’s transportation network.

In addition to these broad approaches to working with CBs, DOT could also benefit by applying the following tactics to ensure a better working relationship with CBs:

• Partner with community-based organizations (CBOs) and bicycle advocacy organizations to gather data on cyclists and cycling conditions.

These organizations offer a wealth of information concerning the location and makeup of populations in particular communities. Several of our surveys were distributed through CBOs, which assisted us in achieving our response rate.

• Bring a familiar face: one who knows local conditions, streets, and neighbors.

Community boards will be more receptive to opinions offered by someone they know and trust. This does not have to be a neighborhood resident, but can be a DOT staffer who has spent time in the community, listening to residents and CB members.

• Create a travel and transportation education program.

Specific strategies include distributing wallet-sized bus timetables to homes in the catchment area, distributing local maps of bike-route access and pedestrian friendly walking routes, and providing free “test tickets” to try out transit. A similar strategy in Perth, Australia led to a measurable decrease in car-dependency for participants.
• **Bring allies to community board meetings.**

Cyclists from particular community districts should be invited to attend community board meetings when cycling infrastructure is on the agenda. Local CBOs with underserved cyclists among their membership can be helpful in bringing support to community board meetings.

This executive summary outlines the issues, process, and recommendations of the Hunter Bicycle Studio. As proponents of sustainable urban transportation, our goal is to assist the DOT Bicycle Program in its implementation of bike lanes and other infrastructure. To that end, we provide a number of recommendations on how the community involvement process can be improved. We also present several recommendations on the issue of transportation justice and how bicycle infrastructure can be more equitably distributed in New York. The research and recommendations of the studio are further explained in our full report.
AUTHORS:
Max Applebaum
Andrew Camp
Conor Clarke
Joe Delia
Jennifer Harris-Hernandez
Sungbae Park
Brian Paul
Scott Richmond
Sam Stein
Matthew Wallach
Sung Hoon Yoo

EDITORS:
Andrew Camp
Conor Clarke
Brian Paul

DESIGN:
Andrew Camp

UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF:
Tom Angotti, PhD
and Eva Tessza Udvarhelyi

Cover Image ©2008 Vélocia | flkr.com