

# Biking After Daley

BY JAMES H. EWERT JR.



## Cycling Into The Future

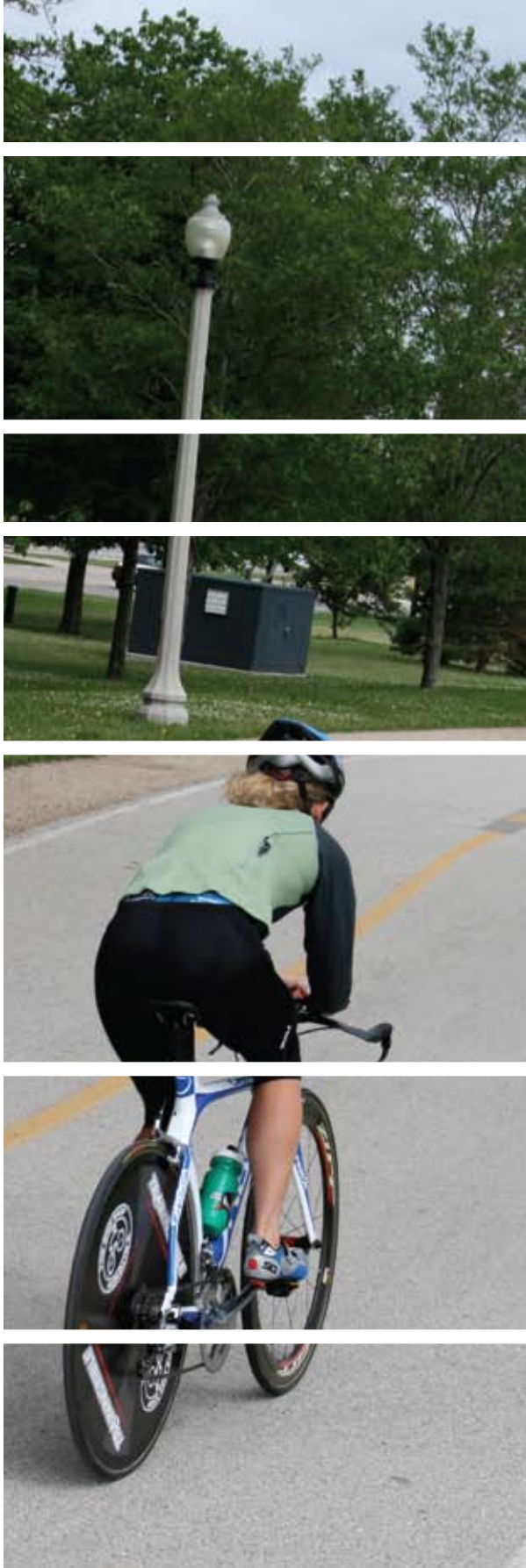


**Shortly after taking office in 1989, Mayor Richard M. Daley's staff bought him a bicycle.**

The newly elected mayor of Chicago began taking brief forays into the dense urban metropolis he now presided over. It was on these periodic excursions, often riding the length of the 18-mile lakefront path, that Mayor Daley first began to really taste the sweet liberation of navigating the city by bike. It was also presumably during these early rides that Mayor Daley's dream of making Chicago the most bike-friendly city in America started to take root. Biking was not particularly new to the Daley family, the elder Mayor Richard J. Daley, sought to encourage cycling in Chicago by establishing a series of bicycle trails, though what is mainly remembered of those efforts are a couple of photographs taken of Mayor Richard J. Daley riding tandem bicycles in a suit and tie.

By the time the younger Daley was elected, the country had survived the oil and gas crisis of the late-1970s that highlighted energy and pollution concerns and was at the end of a crippling recession that had many examining the cost of automobile transportation. Many around the country were beginning to weigh the benefits of alternative modes of transportation, and, in Chicago, a noticeable biking community was emerging. In 1987, the Chicagoland Bicycle Federation was formed to give the growing number of cyclists a formal voice in advocating transportation reforms that benefited and encouraged bicycling.





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– Randy Neufeld, co-founder of the Chicagoland Bicycle Federation (today known as the Active Transportation Alliance)

“Back when we were starting the Chicagoland Bicycle Federation there wasn’t as many cyclists on the streets as there is today, of course, but a lot of people were beginning to realize the potential benefits of biking,” Randy Neufeld said, co-founder of CBF and the organization’s first executive director. “There really wasn’t a link between the city and bike riders that was necessary for effective advocacy at that time.”

Neufeld went on to spend more than two decades with CBF and oversaw the organization as it rapidly built a cooperative working relationship with Mayor Daley and City Hall. In 2008, CBF expanded its mission to include a broad range of transportation alternatives and now operates under the name Active Transportation Alliance.

“In all the time that I’ve known the mayor, biking was always a personal interest of his,” Neufeld said. “Mayor Daley was never the kind of politician that wanted to use his love of biking for political purposes. Yes, he’s held a lot of public events promoting cycling, but I really think that was because of his personal interest and enthusiasm.”

Two years after Daley was elected, that cycling enthusiasm materialized into initiatives like the Bike Chicago celebration, which quickly grew from a single-day rally to promote bicycling into its current form: a five-month-long schedule of events and programs that promote the environmental, health and economic benefits of biking. In 1991, Mayor Daley also established the Mayor’s Bicycle Advisory Council, which has served as the figurative ground-zero for all things bike-related during the mayor’s two-decade tenure. A frequent challenge for bike and transportation advocates is incorporating bike-friendly strategies into urban planning. To facilitate that communication the MBAC brings together members of the public, cyclists, community and advocacy organizations, and officials from the Chicago Transit Authority, Chicago Park District, Mayor’s Office of Special Events, Chicago Department of Transportation, as well the police and other city departments. This model of ground-up community building has been replicated in places like Denver, Salt Lake City and Nashville.

It took just a few meetings for the MBAC to develop the Bike 2000 Plan, an ambitious set of goals and strategies to transform Chicago into what the mayor liked to say,

"the most bike-friendly city in America." One of the main goals was establishing a 300-mile network of bike lanes and trails that would weave itself into the fabric of Chicago's urban landscape. Others included identifying best practices for transportation planning, education efforts, and potential funding streams which would allow each goal to come to fruition.

"It's amazing that a man who's running the third largest city in the United States, with so many components and conflict-

number of innovations in bike lanes, bike parking and city-wide bike rentals, which began in the summer of 2010 with bike rental locations in high-traffic tourist areas.

"One of the most important, if not the most important impacts of the mayor's interest and love in bicycling is that it raised the profile of cycling to a point where bicycles belong on the street," Gomberg said. "Now bicycles belong in the work plans of different city departments, as a budgetary priority, as means of transportation and recreation—and that mes-



ing interests that he would find the time and have the interest to really grill and engage us on so many different aspects of bicycling," Ben Gomberg said, coordinator for the City of Chicago's Bike Program.

Recalling a meeting he had with Mayor Daley in 1998 before Bike to Work Day, Gomberg remembered being blown away by the depth of the mayor's knowledge and interest in biking. Gomberg said he generally takes sparse notes, but after that meeting with the mayor on the Bike 2000 Plan, Gomberg left with pages of scribbles.

In 2001, largely due to the objectives Mayor Daley pushed through in the Bike 2000 Plan, *Bicycling* magazine named Chicago the most bike-friendly city in the country. Invigorated by finally being able to say it with authority, the mayor enlisted the MBAC to begin work on another master plan. Released in 2006, the Bike 2015 Plan upped the ante on just how "friendly" Chicago could be to cyclists.

Chief among goals in the Bike 2015 Plan is an effort to increase bicycle use so that five percent of all trips less than five miles are by bicycle and reduce the number of bicycle injuries by 50 percent from current levels. The plan hopes to expand the city's network of bikeways to 500 miles, improve law enforcement and crash analysis, as well as explore a

sage was loud, clear and consistent over the years." Yet, with all that Mayor Daley has done to promote and encourage cycling in Chicago, he most likely would be the first to say there is still so much more to do.

Writing on bicycling issues for several years and an active cyclist in Chicago for nearly all 21 years of Mayor Daley's term in office, John Greenfield said there is much to like and applaud the mayor for, but worries that after being named the number one cycling city in the country, Chicago has been resting on its laurels for the past few years.

"We've done a lot of things to increase cycling without inconveniencing automobile drivers," Greenfield said. "That's what will really take Chicago to the next level and allow the city to lead the way on progressive transportation innovation."

Greenfield would like to see Chicago include bike plans into the city budget instead of relying on federal funding.

"I know there are funding problems, but bike projects are a lot more inexpensive than car projects," Greenfield said.

So when Mayor Daley leaves his office for the last time in May of 2011, he'll leave behind much more than an empty chair on the fifth floor of City Hall—he'll be leaving behind a bike legacy that is only now getting up to speed.