



## Stop the irrational bike bias

*The case for car-centric planning*

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Did you ride your bike to work today? If so, you're part of the vaunted 1 percent. If, instead, you took the trolley or the bus, you're still among the elite — the small minority of San Diegans who eschew the car in favor of modes favored by the powers that be. But in San Diego, despite the machinations of government and strident voices of “alternative transportation” advocates, cars still rule.

I'm looking at a pattern of grids, laid out in various colors and superimposed on a map of downtown. Composed of “greenways,” “cycleways,” “transitways” and “autoways,” it's termed a “layered mobility network,” the centerpiece of the 104-page Downtown San Diego Mobility Plan. Promulgated by a consortium calling itself Civic San Diego, the plan was approved by a unanimous San Diego City Council on June 21. Advocates believe it will usher in sweeping changes to the ways San Diegans get around, a clean, green rebuke to the automobile. The *Union-Tribune* and the other usual suspects in the media lauded the 30-year blueprint that purports to transform downtown to a bike-commuter's paradise where motorists will be squeezed into fewer and narrower lanes, handing cars their long-overdue comeuppance. Throw in a prediction of reduced greenhouse-gas emissions, they exult, and it'll be eco nirvana.

But there are dissenters, those who contend that cities should be car-centric, because that's what Americans prefer.

One such proponent of the car-centric society is Randall O'Toole of Bandon, Oregon. He's an avid cyclist, but he's also a think-tank guy, a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute, who opines that it's time the car got its due and that — despite the hype heaped on other modes of transport — Americans appreciate the right that the automobile has wrought on the Republic.

When I spoke with O'Toole, he wanted to make sure that he wouldn't be construed as anti-bicycle or anti-public transportation. His stance is that the best form of transit is the one that pays for itself, which leads, he says, to vital questions: Why should the government subsidize non-automotive transportation, and if said modes can't make it

on their own, why should they be preferred? O'Toole urges governmental neutrality when it comes to how Americans choose to travel, adding, "That neutrality should extend to financing. There should be no subsidies to any form of travel."

To hear certain city-planning types talk, one might think that the bicycle is the cure-all for San Diego's transportation woes and the key to prescient development. But not everyone is convinced that bikes are two-wheeled messiahs that will deliver the county — or any other urban conglomerate — from the ostensibly self-evident evils of the automobile. Indeed, there are many on the other side of the proverbial bike lane who contend that, in truth, there is a panoply of rational reasons to favor the much-maligned horseless carriage over not only bikes, but the less "sexy" alternatives — the trolley, the lowly bus, and the feet, as well.

If you've ever been downtown in your car, sitting at a light and waiting for a mostly empty, honking trolley to get out of the way as the surly conductor glares at you, it's part of a plan, says O'Toole. He maintains that, in addition to ladling out fat subsidies, municipalities have implemented other measures to disincentivize auto travel. "Not only have cities given up trying to relieve congestion, some have gone so far as to deliberately make it worse. For example, Los Angeles has actually gone to the trouble of 'uncoordinating' its traffic signals. In the past, there'd been signs posted reading, "signals are set for 30 miles per hour."

I spoke to another think-tanker, Baruch Feigenbaum of the Reason Institute, which, like Cato, champions the libertarian ideal of the laissez-faire economy. I asked him to comment on the Downtown Mobility Plan.

"If the streets are underused and there's room for the bicycle lanes, I have no problem with San Diego putting them in. They're relatively cheap to install, assuming all you're doing is re-painting lines or painting the bicycle lane green. That's fine. The challenge is that when you have a lot of car traffic in that area, the bike lane will make congestion worse. Since car traffic seems to be dominant in San Diego, motorists are the folks we should actually be building the infrastructure for. There is a subsidy for automobiles, but it's typically much smaller than the ones for other forms of transportation. Cyclists don't pay for the use of the infrastructure they're utilizing; there's no 'bicycle tire tax' or anything like that. But we should be planning for the way people actually commute, not the way we'd like them to commute. Since most San Diego residents are driving, I'm hesitant to take away lanes for cars and allocate them for bike use unless there's excess capacity."

Governmental disfavor for the auto is inextricably intertwined with the new urbanism movement. As city planners revisit notions of density, one sees governmental favoritism for cyclists and pedestrians over motorists. O'Toole states, "You can actually see that preference in the U.S. Department of Transportation's 'transportation pyramid.' It puts pedestrians and bikes on top, public transit below, multi-occupant vehicles below that, and at the very bottom, single-occupancy vehicles. They're not neutral, in essence stating that the higher levels of the pyramid are 'morally superior'

to the lower levels.” O’Toole believes that one’s personal transportation preferences shouldn’t guide public policy.

“I love trains, and I love cycling, but I try not to promote policies that ask other people to subsidize my hobbies.” Central to O’Toole’s thesis is that those who use a given mode of transportation (e.g., the automobile) shouldn’t be forced to pay for others’ choices, such as the trolley, bus, or bike.

“The only people who might be smugger than cyclists are vegans,” asserts O’Toole. “Planners and anti-automobile people believe that automobiles are bad because they pollute, have deadly crashes, and use energy. So they think that any alternative is better because it’s assumed that it doesn’t have those drawbacks. Actually, cycling, although it doesn’t pollute or use energy, is more dangerous than driving. Transit uses a lot more energy per passenger-mile than driving, yet they still put transit above automobiles. And light rail is actually more dangerous than automobiles per passenger-mile. So the ‘moral superiority’ argument fails when you look at the actual numbers.”

Can we address the topic without discussing the non-quantifiable? Aesthetic and “moral” considerations (such as exercise, lack of noise) are continually proffered in favor of bikes, but what about quantifiable analyses of financial impacts? “It’s difficult because it’s such a knee-jerk reaction,” replies O’Toole. “On one hand, the policies that planners promote make streets more automobile-hostile than bicycle-friendly. For example, one policy you see frequently is taking a street that has four automobile lanes and turning it into a street with two or three automobile lanes and two very wide bike lanes. That makes it more apparently bicycle-friendly, and it’s definitely more automobile-hostile, since you can’t put as many cars there, but look at the data — where are auto/bike accidents actually taking place? They’re not taking place where a car overtakes a bike and hits it from behind; the vast majority happen at intersections. So, when you give bicycles a new lane, you might be putting more cyclists out there because you’re giving people a feeling that they’re safer, but they’re not safer. You end up with more accidents and fatalities because you haven’t solved the real problem; you’ve only solved an imaginary problem. Government is adopting policies like this without looking at the numbers and asking, ‘What really works?’ They’re just doing it because some urban planner told them to do it.”

Although local opposition to the mobility plan has been given short shrift, it exists. In an online response to a pro-bike *Union-Tribune* article, “Keith P.” wrote, “Even though San Diego’s climate is more amenable to cycling than that found in most places that are jumping on the bike lane bandwagon, this is still a ridiculous overreach. Cycling is something that 98 percent of the citizenry avoids and is mostly a trendy thing for under-30s at the moment. The cost estimates are equally ridiculous — maybe add a zero to the figure of \$62 million and you will get close. Painting lines on pavement is not enough for the cycling lobby and once the inevitable crashes start to ramp up they will be screaming for protected lanes and side guards on trucks, making costs skyrocket. Be prepared for huge pushback from people when their parking

spaces get taken away, when car traffic worsens because lanes are removed, especially when they see few if any cyclists actually use the bike lanes. Happy co-existence between cars and cyclists is a pipe dream. The one thing that should absolutely be mandatory is some sort of registration placard on bikes to help ID them when the inevitable reckless cycling resulting in property damage to cars and personal injuries to pedestrians starts to occur more frequently.”

Once upon a time, development patterns were aligned with automobile usage, but as O’Toole notes, “We stopped building for the automobile beginning in the 1970s; we haven’t been building new highways. Urban planners have a mantra, ‘You can’t build your way out of congestion,’ so they don’t even try. Instead, they come up with alternatives. ‘Let’s have light rail, buses, and bike lanes.’ But there’s very little evidence that these alternatives change anybody’s habits. As cities have grown, there are just as many, or more, single-occupancy vehicles as before on a percentage basis. Sacramento even wrote in one of their regional plans, ‘We’ve had these policies for 25 years now but they haven’t had any effect on people’s travel habits; we’re still seeing urban sprawl, nobody’s riding our light rail. So what are we gonna do now? We’re just gonna do more of the same.’”

When it comes to American transportation history, O’Toole speaks of epochs. “There have been four different time periods. Before 1890, most urban development was oriented around foot travel. Between 1890 and 1920, streetcars; from 1920 to 1980, automobiles. Since 1980, it’s still been oriented around cars in much of the country, but in places where urban planners have a lot of power — which are basically the coastal states — it’s been increasingly oriented toward alternatives to the automobile...unsuccessfully.” And that includes not only the hipster bike, but the déclassé bus.

Ever notice the forlorn buses of San Diego? Largely empty, they cruise our streets with — at most — a handful of riders, who appear to be old, crippled, and poor, people for whom an hour trip to travel 15 miles is not the last resort, but the only resort. According to O’Toole, San Diego’s transit ridership figure is 12 riders per 40-seat bus, a level that’s boosted by the 18-rider average in longer-distance commuter buses. (The national average stands at 11.)

Should the private sector proceed from the standpoint that the car is here to stay? “In a city like San Diego,” opines O’Toole, “if the planners gave you a choice, you’d probably build a traditional suburban development, a master-planned community where developers put in the infrastructure (including all the streets and roads) building what they think people want. It’s very difficult to build that in San Diego County anymore because the land-use planners won’t let you. The political climate makes it impossible to build car-centric in urban San Diego, difficult but not impossible in other parts of the county. It’s hard and time-consuming to get the permits and expensive to buy the land, which in turn makes it expensive for home-buyers.”

Old habits die hard, says O'Toole. "It's wishful thinking. You hear about the Millennials having a huge change in behavior — they don't want to drive, they want to live in apartments — but when you account for the crappy economy of the last eight years, they're really no different. And most of them do live in suburbs. Polls continually show that 80 percent of Americans aspire to live in a single-family home with a yard; I don't see any changes in that. Let the market rule and let people decide for themselves. Let the private developers build what they think the market will bear. You'll see some density, some new urbanism — but about 80 percent of it will be what we call a traditional suburb. Make sure that they pay all the costs for their choices and aren't being subsidized."

Given Americans' overwhelming preference, should the extant governmental bias against the car reach a red light? Quips O'Toole, "That's what would happen if urban planners were all unemployed or working for private developers instead of the government."

Why the irrational bias? "You have to go to the urban-planning schools, which tend to be associated with architecture schools. Architects tend to think that they can shape human behavior by the way they design buildings. Urban planners think that they can shape human behavior by the way they design cities. They then ask, 'What do we want to shape things for?' 'Well, we want to have less greenhouse-gas emissions and we want to have healthier people who are bicycling, so we need to shape our cities for cyclists and transit riders rather than for motorists.' Most of these universities aren't giving their students any analytical skills."

O'Toole maintains that the urban-planning mindset and, ergo, transportation recommendations, fly in the face of rational policy analysis. "I studied both urban planning and urban economics, and everything they taught in one was exactly the opposite of what was taught in the other. Economists base their information on how people actually behave, while urban planners base their information on how they want people to behave."

Addressing trends in San Diego, O'Toole observes, "They've been building a lot of light-rail lines, which hasn't really changed anybody's transportation habits; still only a tiny percentage of people use transit in San Diego."

At .8 percent, biking to work remains a rarity in San Diego, and transit use, while higher, isn't exactly a juggernaut. Of course, there's always attrition.

"One way to increase cycling," laughs O'Toole, "is to kill off or force out all the old folks." Noting the demographics of our aging population, he says that, "By the time senior citizens give up their cars, they're not likely to be able to walk a quarter mile to a light-rail station, much less ride a bike." O'Toole's central thesis is, simply put: "Since driving is the most pragmatic way for the overwhelming majority of Americans to get around most of the time, it makes sense to allow the private sector to react accordingly in a context of governmental neutrality, but it's hampered by subsidies for

other modes and driving restrictions imposed by government.” He notes parking limits in zoning contexts: “There used to be minimum parking thresholds, but planners now urge implementing maximum parking limits, such as, you can only have two-thirds of a parking place per dwelling unit.”

O’Toole believes that the down-with-cars rabble are out of touch with the times. “In the 1960s, there were legitimate reasons to demonize the automobile because of air pollution.” But even as emissions have decreased greatly, due to measures such as the use of unleaded gasoline and catalytic converters, the perception of the evil automobile persists. “What the anti-automobile people have done,” he contends, “is come up with a new evil: greenhouse-gas emissions. Although the catalytic converter reduces toxic emissions, when you burn gasoline, you produce a certain amount of CO<sub>2</sub> per gallon, and that’s fixed. You can’t change that except by going to non-gasoline sources of energy. And since most electricity in the United States is generated by burning fossil fuels (although not in California), even switching to electric cars doesn’t help. So, they’ve got a technology and they search for problems that can be blamed on it, rather than saying, ‘Let’s try to find the most efficient way for people to get around, then try to minimize the environmental and social costs of whatever that way is.’ Cars are safer, less polluting, and use less energy than ever before. The new [federal fuel efficiency] standards mandating 55 miles per gallon in all new cars will greatly reduce greenhouse-gas emissions. All costs are declining, yet those facts are ignored by the anti-automobile crowd.”

Hegemony of the urbanites? “Many people enjoy living in rural areas or in suburbs, but neither group advocates that others should live the way they live. However, a lot of people who live in cities think that everyone should be forced to live the urban life, because it’s so much more morally superior to rural or suburban life. You see this same smugness among cyclists; they’re better, so everyone who opts to drive should be punished by, e.g., having fewer lanes to drive on.”

Americans have voted with their gas pedals for many decades. The polls are closed, the tally is in: the landslide winner in the United States is the car.

“It’s annoying,” says O’Toole. “Cities continue to put all this money and effort into promoting alternatives to the automobile, and making driving harder, but it doesn’t change anybody’s habits. So, we’re wasting that money. Someone should sit down and ask, ‘What actually works?’”

One of the mobility plan’s most bike-centric (and, arguably, most controversial) proposals is the construction of one-way “cycle tracks,” an example of which is shown in a photograph taken in Long Beach. Aside from delighting the neon-costumed, three-abreast bike riders, as well as perhaps momentarily mollifying the Critical Mass anarcho-cyclists, what will be the result?

Baruch Feigenbaum says, “There are a lot of different employment centers and I don’t think enough people would use the cycle tracks to get to work. If you live 20 or 25

miles away from work, it's unlikely that you'll be biking to work." In short, he maintains that one-way cycle tracks will result in a net loss of mobility for San Diegans due to the increase in downtown congestion that won't be offset by a commensurate increase in bike commuting. "When you put a bike lane on one street, you're going to shift traffic onto another street. If that street already happens to be congested, you're going to make it worse."

Feigenbaum cites other reasons that militate against bike commuting. "What kind of work do you do — how do you have to dress? Are there showers at your workplace? Do you need access to a car during the day? Another issue is inhibition of freight movement. Trucks need to get around to make deliveries to downtown merchants, and when you remove lanes and/or loading zones, the trucks block motorists. That, in turn, affects consumers who buy groceries, go to restaurants, and so on."

The mobility plan urges segregation in the form of "Class 4" cycle tracks, where cars are barred. I ask Feigenbaum, "Why is cycling encouraged so strongly?"

He replies, "There are some people who are under the misguided impression that this is going to decrease greenhouse-gas emissions, but it doesn't, because emissions are lowest when vehicles are traveling 30 to 40 mph (typical in most downtown areas at free-flow speeds), so when you cause congestion, you're actually making it worse. This isn't as much about environmental reasons as it is about political realities. You have certain folks who want to make driving as challenging as possible in order to discourage it. In the case of downtown they're looking to do two things: penalize those who don't live in downtown and encourage them to move there so the base will be increased."

According to Feigenbaum, "The cycling push is part of new urbanism in a couple of ways. First, there's a strong link between cycling and higher-income folks, who tend to use it for recreation and not for transportation, which is a problem, because you're using transportation funding to support it. Also, new urbanism advocates often think that wide bike lanes and sidewalks make a place more attractive to live in. Assuming your goal is to get more people to live downtown and you're not concerned about the negative consequences, it might be a good idea; but I don't know if we've ever done any actual quantitative analysis."

I asked Feigenbaum if a certain sort of cultural bias might be at work in the minds and recommendations of the bike-centric advocates. Is this a vision of casually dressed, physically fit, young urban types zipping around town to high-tech gigs? Could it be that the bike-topia construct is at odds with what actually exists?

"I think that's fair to say," replies Feigenbaum. "Policy and planning people tend to be younger, focused on urban areas; there's a self-bias in favor of improvements that they would like to see, which makes sense, but it's not necessarily representative of the country as a whole. You need to look at who you can realistically attract to these places, and then plan...realistically."

Will San Diegans change their habits? Although Feigenbaum is in general accord with O'Toole's view that urban planners, by and large, see things as they wish them to be rather than as they actually are, he's a tad more restrained in his criticism.

"I'm not as critical of planners, perhaps because I have a master's degree in city and regional planning. I hate to single out all planners, but there is a type of planner who has a vision: 'This is what a city should look like — no matter what the data tells us — so that's what we're going to do.' If you look at the country as a whole, there's not a lot of support for it. There's support in places like Portland and San Francisco, and I'm certain there's some support in San Diego, but given how many more people drive than bike to work, how much sense does it make?"

I asked Feigenbaum, in the real world, beyond the rural-hippie enclaves of college towns like Davis, California, and Ames, Iowa, is cycling a viable method of transportation for many?

"Look at Portland, a city with a very bike-friendly culture, roads widened to be safe for cycling, weather that's generally conducive to cycling. With all the money they've spent, you'd think they'd be higher, but they're still at 6 percent. Feigenbaum notes that the cycling share for the entire Portland metropolitan area is around 3.5 percent, reflecting the fact that in outlying suburbs, far fewer people bike to work than in the urban core. "Suburban commuters most often use freeways, which can't be used by cyclists, and would be incredibly expensive to retrofit for bike travel."

If one goal of a bike-centric "mobility plan" is to entice people to move to downtown, are cycleways and such enough? Feigenbaum says, "No. Just putting in bike lanes won't make it happen. You'd have to address the many other reasons that have led people to [eschew] urban life, such as crime, lack of economic development, school quality." He also predicts that increased congestion due to cycleways and bike lanes may have the effect of actually pushing business out of downtown cores (although in most large cities, job centers are already polycentric).

As for subsidies? "Cars and roads aren't generally subsidized except for instances of funds being taken from general appropriation sources and free parking. If there's anything I can favor subsidizing, it's bus service for low-income individuals who otherwise couldn't get to work. Generally, transit has to be subsidized. This can be justified from an economic standpoint because if these folks can't get to a job, they'll be unemployed. Cycling, on the other hand, is predominately an activity for upper-middle-class white folks who can commute to work another way, so there's no reason to subsidize it."

Subsidized or not, Americans are certainly not choosing cycling. "Why should we be re-designing cities," asks Feigenbaum, "for this very small number of people when 98 percent aren't using this mode, aren't interested in this mode?"



It all boils down to politics. “Cyclists, who tend to be well educated, affluent, and liberal-leaning, know how to use the political process to get what they want. If you look at the amount of improvements made for cyclists, given that cyclists make up about .5 percent of commutes nationwide (around 1 in 200), it’s evident cyclists are very good at creating policies to meet their needs. There’s no concern about making good policy as a whole as long as they get what they want.”