



WHO PARTICIPATES IN WHAT PROCESSES?

*From groupthink to democracy in
bicycle policy advocacy*

A REPORT FOR THE LEAGUE OF AMERICAN BICYCLISTS' EQUITY INITIATIVE AND YOUTH BIKE SUMMIT
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MARCH 2015



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Introduction

In policy studies, the subfield of agenda setting examines two major components that shape policy agendas: “active participants and the processes through which issues rise to prominence” (Kingdon 1995 quoted in Eissler et al. 2014).

Considering the role youth voices could play in setting a national bike advocacy agenda requires examining both of these components. In this report, I will outline recommendations for how the League of American Bicyclists could provide a meaningful role for youth voices based on the trust model created by the Youth Bike Summit. This report synthesizes my observations from sixteen months as a League employee at their Washington, D.C. office and two years’ attendance at the Youth Bike Summit (2014 in New York City and 2015 in Seattle).

Creating a space that cultivates a range of perspectives will have effects beyond empowering youth participants. It is a necessary first step toward championing a bike movement where more people of color and others with marginalized perspectives can set the agenda for this diverse country’s bicycling future.

The League, as a leader in the field, has the resources to connect people from historically marginalized groups with national bicycle policy advocacy. They could lead in moving bicycle advocacy beyond “groupthink,” which results “when homogeneous groups fail to think critically in their decision making in their search for group consensus” (Weible et al. 2011).

CONTEXT & PROJECT IMPETUS: EQUITY AT THE LEAGUE

The League is a member-supported national bicycle advocacy organization that undertakes federal policy lobbying as well as providing technical assistance to state and local level organizations. It has existed in various forms since its founding in 1880 as the League of American Wheelmen. The League also sets standards for “bike friendly” cities, businesses, and universities and for bicycle education for adults. League members are individuals, clubs, and other groups organized around bicycling.

As part of its commitment to “listening and learning,” the organization launched an Equity Initiative in early 2013. Later that year, the League received a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation under its childhood obesity prevention program. The grant, “Increasing Diversity and Equity in Bicycle Advocacy,” was intended to transform the League into an organization that would seed equity, diversity, and inclusion in the bike movement.

I was hired to manage the project and was the Equity Initiative Manager from November 2013 to March 2015. Based on what I saw in my employment at the League, I think it is likely that the establishment of the Equity Initiative, and the subsequent decision to take on a grant project, took place without a thorough review of what changes these commitments would require in organizational practice. This was compounded by the choice to hire a new staff to lead the program, which meant that someone who did not have social capital within the organization was tasked with leading a change process. As a result, meetings often felt like a power struggle over what issue areas were relevant to the organization’s work.

Some of the tension I encountered stemmed from a lack of clarity on what the organization wished to achieve as “bike equity.” Given carte blanche to develop the program when I was hired, I worked to develop projects that would connect ideas from the bike movement’s marginalized participants with the policy agenda-setting work done by League personnel. I believed the Equity Initiative’s intention was to organize and elevate people of color and young people already excited about bicycling.

After some time working for the organization, I came to understand that the policy staff had a different interpretation of the Equity Initiative’s goals. Some individuals working for the League have many years of relationships with federal agencies and members of Congress, which is a significant component of the organization’s success with policy advocacy. These staff, who all had more social capital within the organization or positional authority above me, expected to form partnerships with other policy actors interested in equity as a policy project, rather than crafting policy ideas based on participation from grassroots actors.

There is an important difference between an advocacy group looking to its own grassroots for advice and an advocacy group looking to other policy professionals for advice

These two goals are not in opposition to each other, but there is an important difference between an advocacy group looking to its own grassroots for advice and an advocacy group looking to other policy professionals for advice. I championed the former as a bottom-up approach to bike equity; the League expected the latter, a top-down approach. In short, the League as I observed it was open to equity partnerships across different policy subsystems (e.g., branching from bicycling into transportation) but was less prepared to integrate new partners from within the bike movement into its work. Professionals in equity policy could more readily become participants in the League’s agenda setting than diverse bike movement figures focused on community-oriented programs and education.

The lack of consensus on what bike equity should mean in practice stalled transforming the League’s internal culture. However, external movement building has been possible through networking, events, and reports about bike projects centered in equity, diversity, and inclusion.

There is significant interest in these topics among bike movement participants today, nowhere more so than in the Youth Bike network.



Photos of the 2015 Youth Bike Summit photos courtesy of Youth Bike.



YOUTH BIKE SUMMIT

The Youth Bike network connects education programs at community bike shops around the country. Many of these offer earn-a-bike or similar programs that use bike repair as a youth empowerment strategy. While these programs had been growing in number for decades, the Youth Bike Summit (YBS) brought them into closer conversation.

The YBS started because two teenage girls felt out of place at the League’s National Bike Summit in 2010 and shared this with an adult they trusted, who then helped them create a separate youth-centered event. “The Youth Bike Summit was literally conceived on the bus ride home from Washington, D.C.,” Pasqualina Azzarello, Executive Director of Youth Bike, said in the League’s 2014 report *The New Movement: Bike Equity Today*. “At first, we thought the Youth Bike Summit would be a local or regional event, but we quickly learned that the need and desire for youth, educators, and advocates to come together and exchange ideas and learn from one another was bigger than our imaginations at the time.”

I first attended YBS in 2014, in its fourth year. It was held on the campus of Parsons The New School for Design in New York City. From the volunteers at the registration table, to the hundreds of people in the auditorium, to the young people onstage as keynote speakers, I saw many demonstrations of the adult organizers’ commitment to elevating youth voices.

Recently YBS’ co-organizer, Parsons professor Jane Pirone, explained that even though YBS had been held on her own campus in the past, she did not know about it at first because nobody had secured official Parsons sponsorship. She decided that there should be more institutional support for YBS, which intersected with her own participatory design research and teaching. With Jane managing the campus logistics, the subsequent YBS was moved to a date when more Parsons students would be encouraged to join the event, and she even managed to set up a college credit for youth participants. After years in New York City, YBS moved to the west coast in 2015 because its steering committee of community bike shop leaders decided this would

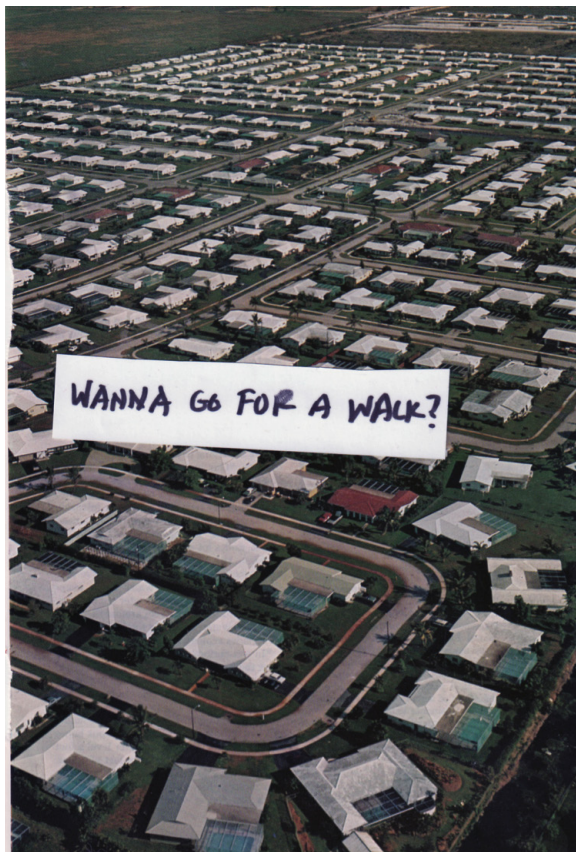


FIGURE 1 (left)
Built environments designed for driving as an issue area for a youth bike advocate.

FIGURE 2 (right)
Classism in transportation, accessibility, and climate as issue areas for youth bike advocates.

allow a different group of young people to participate, in addition to giving returning attendees exposure to a different landscape.

The YBS emerges from relationships of trust between youth participants in bike education programs and the staff who run those programs. Without the allyship of adults, YBS may not have started and it may not have flourished. Yet at YBS, adults routinely tell each other to pipe down so more youth can speak up.

THE EXPERIMENT AT YBS15

I was impressed by the Youth Bike Summit's construction of a youth-centered space in bicycle advocacy, and I spent some time in 2014 looking for a way to bring that network's insights into the League's activities. How could we bridge from the bicycle advocacy mainstream to this youth-centered space without asking young people to adopt a preset agenda?

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In December, I met Dr. Allison Mattheis of California State University, Los Angeles at an academic conference, where she presented on a student project she had managed as an education professor. A central purpose of the project was to call students' attention to the ways their views differed from those of authority figures, in this case members of the Los Angeles Unified School District's Board of Supervisors. The method she shared for mapping dominant narratives and counter narratives seemed like a fruitful direction for eliciting youth perspectives that might differ from the adult ones dominant in bicycle advocacy.

Beginning in January, Mattheis collaborated with Hamzat Sani of the League's Equity Advisory Council (EAC) and me to develop a plan for a session at the 2015 Youth Bike Summit to be held in Seattle in February 2015. We would experiment with capturing youth perspectives on bicycling and streets.

We discussed the need to refrain from assuming that we knew in advance what YBS attendees would identify as issues relevant to bicycling. We decided to leave the session largely open in format to accommodate whoever showed up, with a craft activity as the unifying element.

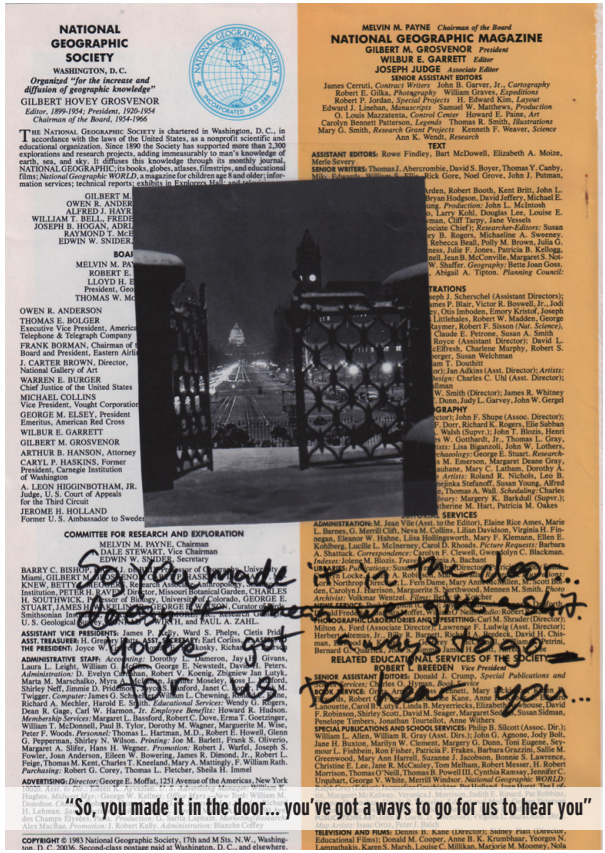
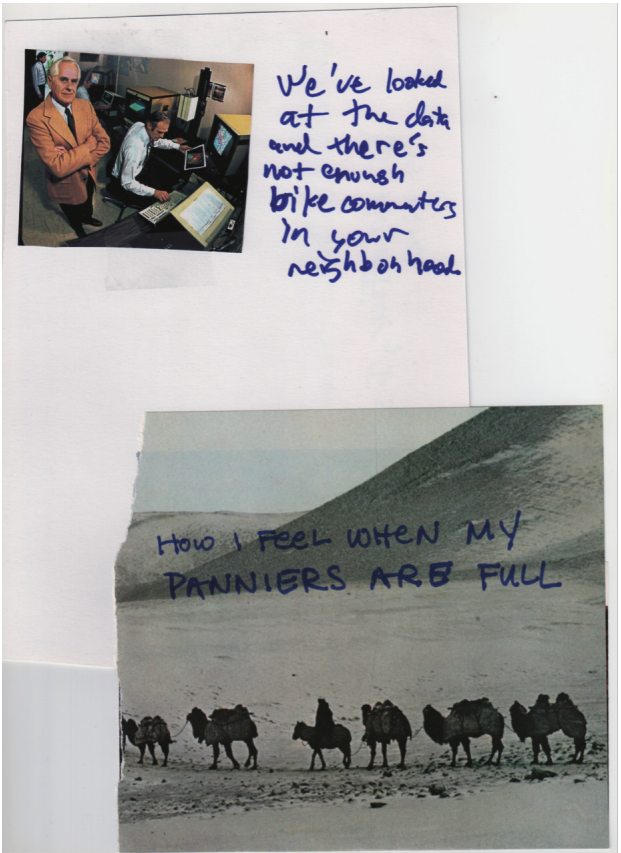


FIGURE 3 (left) Data limitations and humor as issue areas for youth bike advocates.

FIGURE 4 (right) Inclusion and tokenism as an issue area for a youth bike advocate.

Each participant would be given materials to make her/his own “meme,” which is a graphic accompanied by a few words that has become a common form of online messaging. As Hamzat noted, memes allow people to say things with images that might jokingly or in other ways subvert the expected meaning of those images.

I had previously created a series of memes with community psychologist *Echo Rivera on the topic of racial profiling in policing as a street safety issue*, and thought it would be consistent with the Equity Initiative to develop a youth collective voice project using a similar visual framework.

Using magazines as source material, we would ask our session participants to find images relating to transportation as a first step, and then to make memes out of them. We hoped to gather some perspectives on bicycling that might express directions other than the current main concerns for bike advocates, which are infrastructure, bike share systems, and reducing bicyclist fatalities caused by drivers.

I was also invited to be a keynote speaker at YBS and was excited to find so much diversity and energy in the old theater space that was the opening venue. Onstage, I was one of nine speakers who would give short talks. There were

three youth, six adults, and four of us were people of color. I was the only woman of color. I heard a strong emphasis on perspective in the opening remarks from organizer Jane Pirona, and from the speakers ahead of me as they went through their presentations. I did not, however, hear people identifying their own perspectives.

I decided to alter my talk on bicycle anthropology to share more about me. I added a description of my ethnic heritage, where I grew up, how I got into bicycling, how I got into bicycle advocacy, and why. I wanted the audience to know that the adults onstage telling them how much they should value their own perspectives came from somewhere, too.

What I knew might not be the same as what the teenagers listening to me knew, and I told them that sometimes they were going to have to fight to get their perspectives taken seriously when adults were not ready to admit things beyond their own experiences.

We did not know everything; we knew the world through our embodied experiences of it, and so did they. That meant what I knew might not be the same as what the teenagers listening to me knew, and I told them that sometimes they were going to have to fight to get their perspectives taken seriously when adults were not ready to admit things be-

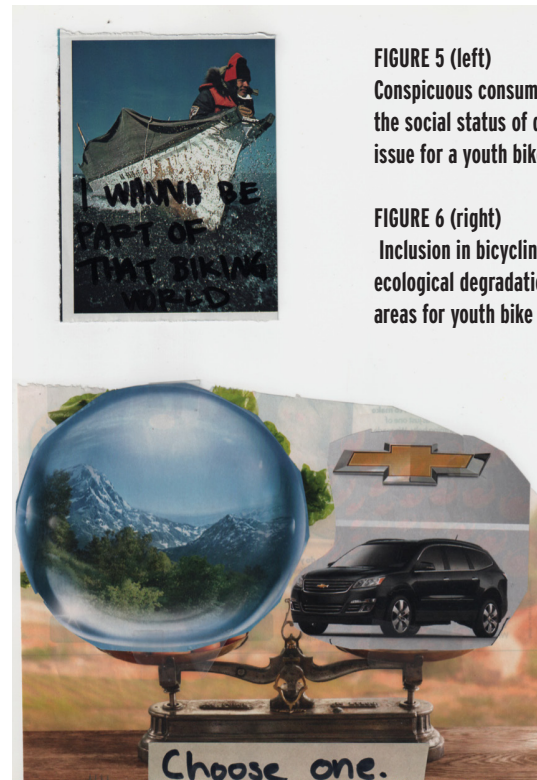


FIGURE 5 (left)
Conspicuous consumption and the social status of driving as an issue for a youth bike advocate.

FIGURE 6 (right)
Inclusion in bicycling and ecological degradation as issue areas for youth bike advocates.

yond their own experiences. I ended my talk by encouraging the audience to pay attention to moments when they felt their values were dismissed by someone with more social status than them.

As the day went on, I popped into a number of sessions, and in some I saw a contrast between the racial diversity of youth audiences and panels composed of white adults. Were we asking these teenagers to accept it as normal that adults in the bike movement did not look like them?

I wondered which youth bike organizations were facilitating discussions back home about these differences. In what ways could we be attentive to the complex issues youth of color face in their everyday lives that might be less visible to adults with different experiences of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc.? What techniques had staff at youth bike organizations developed to build rapport with their program participants, especially with kids from backgrounds different than their own?

Some of these staff had accompanied their young charges on a cross-country trip to make it to YBS; that fact illustrated the degree of trust present between these bike organizations and the families they served.

By the time the session I'd organized with Allison and Hamzat took place, it hit me that this trust I was seeing on display was not something that we had earned with youth attendees. However, we did collect great insights in the session (see Figures on pages 6-9 for memes).

We gathered a number of intersectional perspectives on what issue areas related to bicycle advocacy for the session participants, including

- » unwanted sexual attention,
- » racial profiling,
- » the judicial system,
- » built environments designed for driving,
- » inclusion in bicycling,
- » tokenism of youth voices,
- » classism expressed through transportation choices,
- » conspicuous consumption and the high social status of driving,
- » ecological degradation,
- » the othering of bike commuters,
- » wheelchair accessibility,
- » the limitations of commuter data,
- » and, of course, humor.



FIGURE 7 (above)
The othering of bike commuters as an issue area for a youth bike advocate.

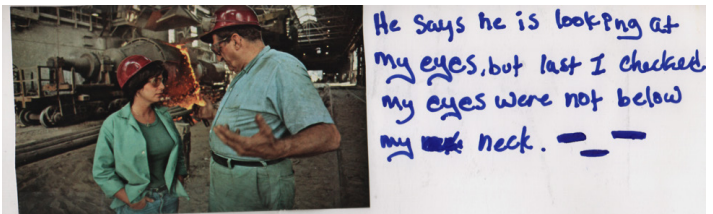
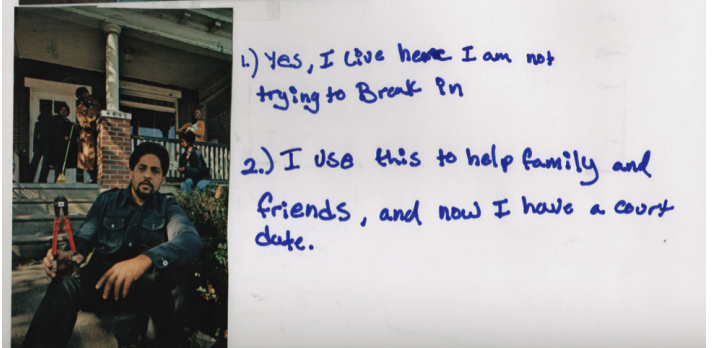


FIGURE 8 (right)
Unwanted sexual attention, racial profiling, and the judicial system as issue areas for youth bike advocates.



Future research on youth collective voice using YBS as a site should be designed in collaboration with YBS staff and teen participants, and facilitated by those stakeholders. Their relationships of trust are the defining feature of the event and the Youth Bike network, and these cannot be easily passed to or accessed by outsiders. Seeing those relationships in action was a humbling experience.

DISCUSSION

Trust is central to democratizing bicycle advocacy. The model of trust I've seen at YBS involved adults leveraging institutional resources to create a youth-centered environment.

How can more adults be allies in supporting youth ideas, rather than expecting them to take on adults' perspectives?

How can more adults be allies in supporting youth ideas, rather than expecting them to take on adults' perspectives? What is good mentorship versus using youth as token voices? In a *report she completed for the League in 2013* that referenced sociologist Roger Hart's Young People's Ladder of Participation, youth EAC member Devlynn Chen commented that, "the best way to allow youth to surpass the tokenism rung [on Hart's Ladder] is to trust that they have the ability to add and build the project."

The Youth Bike network has tremendous potential to define for bicycle organizations what this trust looks like, and how to achieve it.

At the same time that trust should be a central focus for bicycle organizations committed to inclusion, we also need to make an intentional commitment to move past groupthink. Changing bicycle advocacy will mean taking a broader set of needs into account, and mobilizing a network of similarly positioned policy actors does not necessarily achieve inclusion in agenda setting. The intersectional perspectives on display at YBS should be welcome in bicycle advocacy because they shed light on a broader range of concerns.

It would be a shame to see the relationships of trust being cultivated in community bike shops across the United States lead young people into accepting bicycle advocacy norms where their insights are overlooked while their diverse bodies are reduced to token status. Groupthink is an impediment to new voices reaching leadership levels in bicycle advocacy.

The overlap of issue areas that characterizes life in communities of color should be seen as a strength for bicycle advocacy — not a threat to its efficacy — but it is crucial to accept that including new voices will mean pausing to reconsider the national bike policy advocacy agenda.

In a 2012 analysis of media effects on how quickly a bill becomes law, policy scholar Michelle Wolfe found that bringing in new participants and arguments can "put the brakes" on policy processes as they become more democratic. A greater range of perspectives will lead to better advocacy work that fulfills the League's stated mission of creating a "Bicycle Friendly America for everyone."



This is not just about youth or other newcomers learning how to advocate; it's about advocates learning who they are advocating for, which takes time. Participation in agenda setting does not currently match the intended "everyone," and slowing down the process so more people can get involved is crucial to increasing diversity in bicycle advocacy that leads to more equitable strategies serving more communities' needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

An equitable national movement will grow from a demonstration of respect for and resources committed to cultivating diverse perspectives. The following recommendations provide direction for how bicycle organizations might transform bicycle advocacy from a space defined by groupthink into a driver of democracy.

» LEVERAGING INSTITUTIONAL RESOURCES CAN BE A POSITIVE USE OF POSITIONAL AUTHORITY TO FURTHER INCLUSION.

Within the bike movement there is already a diversity of people with varying amounts of social power, and an expansion of bicycling to more populations would certainly mean an increase in participation by less socially powerful groups.

Any organization concerned with equity should consider how it acts as an ally or not to these less socially powerful groups. As Jane Pirone showed in the case of supporting YBS through Parsons, existing institutions can cultivate spaces designed for youth to learn and experiment. This is different from expecting these new participants to support an existing advocacy agenda.

Without a commitment to this learning environment, those with greater positional authority can easily tokenize or otherwise negatively reduce the impact of youth or other participants who have less positional authority. Build trust through organization-level action that demonstrates respect for different experiences and perspectives.

» OPEN POLICY ADVOCACY TO NEW IDEAS AND INNOVATION BY CLARIFYING THE AGENDA-SETTING PROCESS.

Examining who participates in what kinds of processes will further the goal of creating a more equitable bike organization and movement. Unexamined agenda setting maintains a divide between expert and community member, and between professional advocates and the majority of bicycle users in this country, who are not professional advocates.

The first step to opening that agenda-setting process is to get its current state mapped, using a logic model or other diagram. According to Gen and Wright, "using a logic model approach offers the advantage of determining the desired outcomes of an advocacy effort at the outset, to encourage clear connections between advocacy strategies and goals" (2013, p. 171). The same article provides several examples of policy advocacy logic models (see Figures 1 and 2 on p. 182-185 in Gen and Wright 2013).

The advocacy strategy I attempted to introduce through the League's Equity Initiative was most closely aligned with their "enhanced democratic environment" strategy, which I have reproduced in Appendix A. The League and other policy advocacy organizations should consider using logic models to test and evaluate policy strategies.



They could then offer educational opportunities at the National Bike Summit and at YBS that outline the current process for how the federal bike lobby sets its agenda.

» LEARN MORE ABOUT WHO CURRENTLY PARTICIPATES IN BICYCLE POLICY ADVOCACY AGENDA SETTING.

Perhaps the biggest step forward that professional advocates can take toward inclusion is coming to understand their own perspectives better so that they can recognize their strengths and limitations. Being allies means accepting differences without getting defensive.

Adults can create the conditions for young people to describe the world as they have experienced it, without judgment. This would be greatly aided through learning more about bike advocacy's internal norms and profiling its typical participants. As a longtime leader in bicycle advocacy, the League could steward this process.

» LEARN MORE ABOUT WHAT BICYCLING POPULATIONS DO NOT PARTICIPATE IN POLICY ADVOCACY AGENDA SETTING AND INVEST IN THEM.

The YBS network could be an excellent starting point for learning more about who will participate in bicycle policy advocacy agenda setting in the future and what their needs are today. In Appendix B, I have included a proposed survey for the Youth Bike network and other bicycle organizations that would create for bicycle leadership a project akin to Green 2.0, which is an ongoing effort to set benchmarks for increasing diversity in environmental leadership (see Taylor 2014). Using results gathered in a survey project, a research team could define what justice-centered and intentionally equitable bicycle organizations should look like and design

proposed activities that would empower existing bicycle partners to achieve new leadership roles.

» SET MEANINGFUL INTERNAL BENCHMARKS FOR INCLUSION.

Cultivating leaders from within the bike movement will take time but will ensure a more democratic advocacy agenda serving more public needs.

Drawing on the diversity that already exists in the bike movement is a good strategy for building a stronger base from which to challenge the overwhelming dominance of car-based transportation policy. For this to occur, the League, YBS, and other bike groups must set clear internal benchmarks for inclusion.

These benchmarks are crucial to getting beyond tokenism and groupthink in bicycle advocacy and moving forward with the transformative work of diversifying leadership in the field. These benchmarks should be defined by an independent expert or group centered in social justice, but co-created with and adopted by bicycle organizations.

REFLECTION

By Andy Clarke, League President

In the League's strategic plan, we commit to becoming representative of and connected to America's diverse communities. The recommendations in this report offer a powerful and challenging path forward for the League, and the broader bicycling movement, if we are to achieve that vital goal.

The journey the League is taking in addressing equity, diversity and inclusion is every bit as messy and challenging as we knew it would be. The bicycle advocacy world of the past 30 years is indeed defined by a relatively homogenous group of people who have struggled mightily to put bicycling on the agenda of transportation, health, community development, environment, energy; to earn some basic level of respect and status for people who ride bikes.

We haven't been entirely successful in that struggle yet, but significant progress has been made. Bicycling is now part of the conversation in many areas of public policy where it was previously ignored. That's a good thing. And yet that success is generating perhaps an even greater challenge and opportunity — listening to and learning from the extraordinarily diverse voices and participants in the new bicycling movement.

Last September, two things happened to change my world view. At the Pro Walk Pro Bike Pro Place conference in Pittsburgh, I was struck by the realization that a new generation of talented and very competent planners, engineers, educators, advocates and leaders has emerged in the bicycling world — and they are not constrained by the baggage that I carry around with me.

Bikes are part of the plan, part of the design, part of the program. We have a seat at the table; doors that were once firmly closed are now open. That's exciting — and strangely difficult to accept. Because it means I have to change how I think and what I do.

Around the same time, the League published a report documenting the inspiring new generation of organizations, leaders, projects and programs emerging around the general "bike equity" theme. That report opened my eyes to the shocking reality that virtually none of them emerged from the traditional, or mainstream, or familiar-to-me bike movement. Evidently there wasn't a place in the existing bike club and advocacy world for something like Red, Bike and Green or the East Side Riders to flourish.

The report was exciting — and strangely difficult to accept. Because it means the League and our clubs and advocacy affiliates have to change how we think and what we do.

Change is difficult. And change is essential if we are to remain relevant, sustainable, and effective as a movement and an organization. The lessons learned from the Youth Bike Summit are significant. We must commit to "cultivate spaces designed for youth to learn and experiment" — and the same is true for people of color and women as well as youth. We must be allies to and embrace new voices, leadership, issues, priorities and ways of doing things, or we risk irrelevance.

To be truly successful, the benchmarks for inclusion must indeed measure how much we benefit from combining a strong existing base with new constituents and voices; how much we add to our value and relevance by embracing new ideas and approaches.

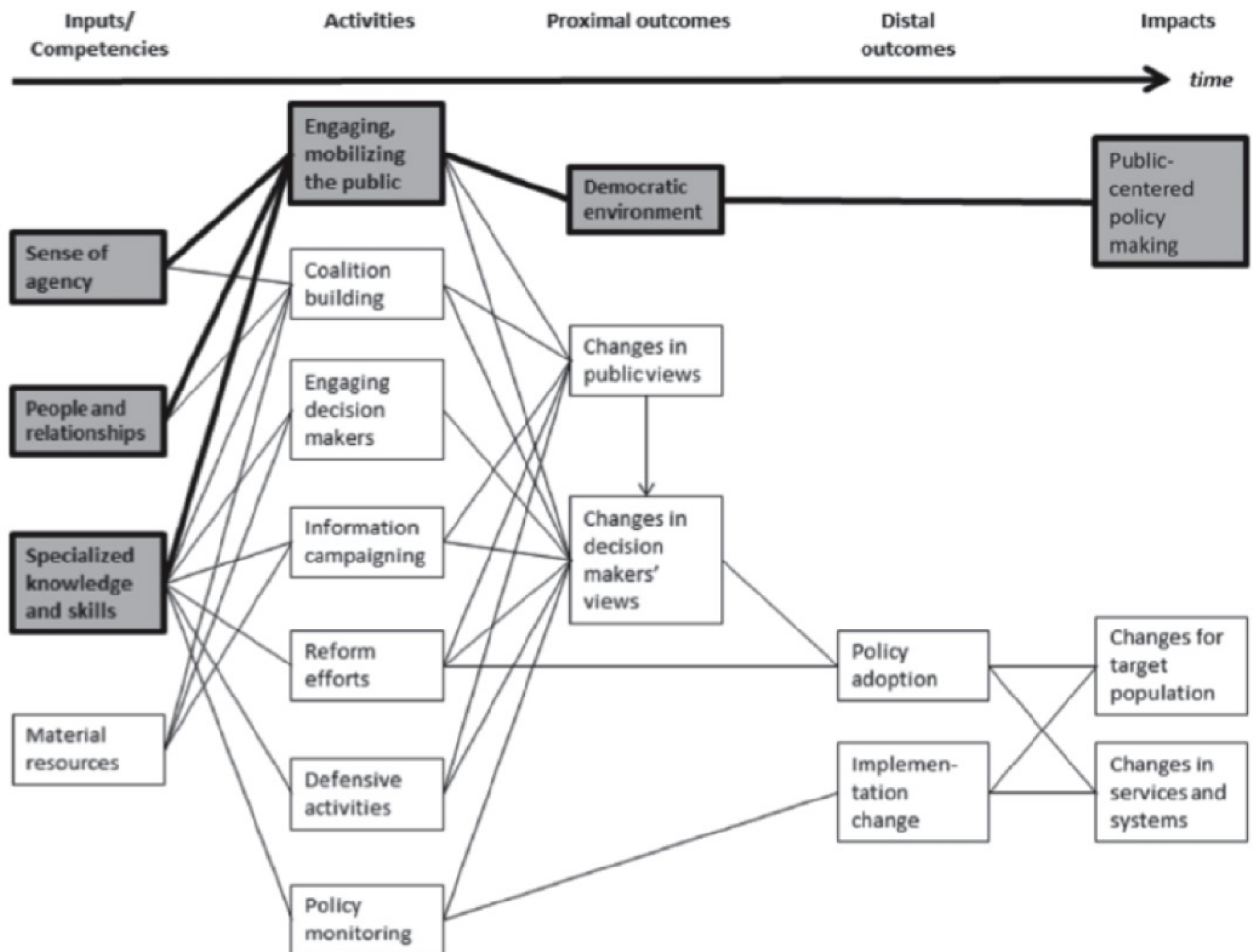
This report helps guide us along that path of change and growth.



APPENDIX A: Enhanced Democratic Environment Policy Advocacy Logic Model
 (Reproduced from Gen and Wright 2013)

A Framework for Policy Advocacy

2a: Enhanced democratic environment



APPENDIX B: Survey about the Current State of Bicycle Organizations

The purpose of a survey of bicycle organizations modeled after the Green 2.0 project would be to gather demographics on staff, board, and publics served. It would also provide an entry point for evaluating the effects of diversity or homogeneity on agenda setting. How are we supporting diverse values throughout the professionalization process? This survey could provide directions forward for projects developing diverse bike leaders and setting the bar for inclusion.

Data to gather:

- » Board demographics
- » Staff demographics
- » Participant demographics
- » Regional demographics
- » Does the organization openly discuss racial differences (if present) between staff and publics served?
- » What justice conversations are happening in your city or region? Are those conversations brought into the space of your programs?
- » How have you worked to connect the complex issues your participants face to agenda setting at your organization?

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