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Lobbying for Cycling in DC

Lots of people complain about how things are; some actually work very hard to make things better. The needs of cyclists are no different from anything else in this regard; there are literally many millions of active cyclists in this country, and potentially many times that who would be active cyclists if the infrastructure (roads & community layout) were better designed for safe commuting and recreational riding. TodayÂ Chain ReactionÂ Bicycles is part of 120 dealers who, along with unpaid cycling advocates numbering several times that, areÂ trying to makeÂ the United States a betterÂ place for bikes.Â 500 or so people looking out for many million. It's likely that we're very typical that way; a small number of people influencing very big decisions. The exception would be when the PTA is lobbying; we bring a small division, while they bring an entire army!

It works like this- Wednesday morning, 7:30am,Â my brother Steve, his wife Teri, my daughter Becky and I areÂ supposed to be wide awake (on east coast time, no less!) and ready to go to "school." We learn about the issues, we learn about the League of American Bicyclists proposed solutions, and we learn about the threats to programs already in place due to the severe budget cuts at the federal level. We have our choice of seminars to attend dealing with a myriad of policy and practical issues, many of which, on paper, look about as exciting as the most-boring thing you everÂ listened toÂ on NPR. And they would be exactly that (boring) were it not for the fact that these issues touch the cycling community and yourself personally, and knowing how things work helps you to make a difference. At the end of the afternoon you meet with your delegation and split up assignments for meeting with the various congress men & women on the 'hill, who you'll be seeing the next day.

Wednesday evening you have your various fund-raisers and industry gigs to attend, including one from Trek bicycles at which I had my annual beer. Actually I passed on the beer this time and went for a gin & tonic, the only "mixed drink" I have any sort of taste for. That one drink was enough to get me through the next year (in my heaviest drinking days, I was probably up to 15-20 beers or glasses of wine... per year).

Thursday morning you put on your "Sunday best" suit, including having to do that top button on the shirt so you can wear a tie. That top button that makes you want to choke, a metaphor for what it feels like the first time you visit a congressional office on your own. Fortunately, that was several years ago, and it's rarely the case that you'd be by yourself, especially in a state as well-represented by bicycle advocates as California is. Safety in numbers. Then it's time to head to the Metro and storm the 'hill!

The California representatives at the DC Bike Summit filled a small room; it's quite the task to get a group this large organized an on-messageWe had an interesting day on the 'hill. We met with Representatives Jackie Speier, Elton Gallegly, a drop-by with Loretta Sanchez's office, talked with Anna Eshoo's Legislative Director Casey Fromson, walked the halls a bit looking for anyone else needing help and then wished we'd booked an earlier flight out.

Jackie Speier started the day out on the fast track, as we were led from her office by her aide, down the hall a bit and adjacent to one

of those very-important-rooms with lots of TV cameras and a young TV reporter primping herself to look something a bit more, er, stylin' we'll say, than her "Sunday best." We'd stumbled upon the center of attention at the moment, the House emotionalÂ hearings on the supposed radicalization of Muslims in AmericaÂ and Jackie Speier was center-stage. We wondered how she could possible meet with us herself (tyically we deal with a legislative aide) in the midst of such a wild scene, but that she did, discussing in frank terms the difficulties faced by anyone asking the current Congress for anything. SheÂ looked and spokeÂ a bit worn-down & beaten, but is most certainly a champion of more-livable communities that aren't gridlocked and held hostage by foreign governments who have the oil that fules the flames of our desires.

Next stop was the cafeteria, and, since DC is a study of stark contrast, so would be my lunch. Bacon, ham & bleu-cheese pizza with carrot & celery sticks. We recharged our batteries and headed to the office of Representative Elton Gallegly. Let me tell you about Mr. Gallegly. He is an elderly, seriously-affable gentleman, wise in the ways of the world, very approachable, and very conservative. He's very good friends with Representative Earl Blumenaeur, our most-reliable spokesperson in DC, has bought several hundred inexpensive bikes for kids at poor schools each Christmas, has a photo on the wall of he & his wife riding an cruiser tandem along the beach, and you're thinking, OK, what's not quite right here? Well, that's when he tells you that he likes bike lanes but only when cyclists stay in them, and he'll make us a deal, if we stay in our bike lanes he'll stay in the car lanes, otherwise, he feels it's only right that he drives in the bike lane.

He had a huge amount of respect for the 31 years that Steve and I have been in business, probably because he's been in Congress since 1987. I made a point of thanking him for his support of HR4 (House bill #4), which repealed a requirement of the President's healthcareÂ plan that would have caused small businesses like Chain Reaction to have to spend a ton of extra hours each month to filing reports for every single vendor we spend more than $600 with, likely an unforseen consequence of something added to the plan to make sure that there weren't businesses (identified by our cash outflow) that should be offering health care to their employees but weren't.

His chief-of-staff was well-versed in the goings-on of the current battle over the funding level for transportation, and appeared interested as well as understanding the concept that cycling infrastructure was a relatively low-cost way of dealing with many issues. Either that or he figured that acting that way was a good way to get us to leave their office feeling good about the guy despite their actual intention to chop off funding for anything that isn't fueled by oil.

OK, more to come, right now I'm just too zoned out, waiting for a delayed flight that will eventually get me home sometime around 3:45am. Not fun. (Added later- that was a pretty close guess; we were home around 3:30am. I later added to this piece on 3/18/11.)
--Mike--