

Bicycle advocates face big challenge

Staff Report

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MARIN BICYCLE advocates are convinced they can move the needle and get more residents to walk and ride bikes instead of driving cars.

The federal government has given the county \$25 million to show they are right.

The pilot program is about more than wishful thinking. A report to Congress last week established some important baseline data by measuring travel behavior in Marin and the three other communities selected for the \$100 million Nonmotorized Transportation Pilot Program.

The next report will be released in 2010-11 and show what progress has been made.

Any progress will be welcome, but numbers that show significant increases in walking and cycling will make a strong case for committing big chunks of money to such programs. That is why hard data are so important.

The numbers were based on surveys of residents and traffic counts last year. They show that Marin, while doing better than many areas, has much room for improvement.

- 82 percent of daily trips here were by car or truck.
- 11.8 percent were on foot.
- 3.2 percent were by bus.
- 1.8 percent were on a bike.

- The average trip on a bike was 8.6 miles; it was 2.3 miles for those who walked.

Recreational cycling was not counted as a trip.

Marin's percentage of daily trips by walking and cycling was 13.6 percent; the national average was 9.5 percent.

Advocates and county officials are betting that spending \$20 million on bike and pedestrian paths and other infrastructure improvements will encourage residents to leave their autos at home and prove that the federal grant was money well spent.

Marin's history of bicycle advocacy is a big reason why the county was selected.

Twenty-five million dollars seems like a lot, but the list of potential projects in Marin would have required far more.

Marin's spending plan was winnowed down to 23 capital projects and studies, including bike paths along Alameda del Prado in Novato, Doherty Drive in Larkspur and Mahon Creek in San Rafael. One study will look at opening the Alto Tunnel to provide easy bicycle access between Mill Valley and Corte Madera. That long has been a dream of bicycle advocates.

The federal pilot program, while ambitious, also should be viewed in the larger context of what the Marin County Bicycle Coalition has been working on for a decade. Its goal is to build out the bike and pedestrian infrastructure throughout the county and encourage residents to use it.

That means changing more than just the culture of how we get around. It means working with city and other public engineers to think about improving bike and pedestrian access when making any street

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improvements.

Creating the political will to open tunnels and build more bike paths is an accomplishment in which bicycle advocates should take pride. They have moved that needle.

But changing Marin's auto-centric mindset, which has been engrained by decades of land-use planning based on driving, is a far greater challenge. For many local cyclists, riding is a form of recreation. Making major inroads into daily vehicle use ultimately will require a huge shift in how we live and work that will take decades.

Marin advocates deserve credit for tackling this complex issue. The stakes, after all, are high and getting higher, including the need to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels and address climate change and global warming.

We urge you to think about these numbers - and think twice before you get behind the wheel to run an errand.

Every trip counts. And moving the needle includes keeping an eye on the one in your dashboard that shows how much gas you are using.

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