

Building Biking System Creates Healthy Option

By Brad Allenby

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I always enjoy visiting the Netherlands. It's a small country, prosperous and nicely designed, with a cultural friskiness that enabled them to become the first major European trading empire.

This time, I was visiting the Technical University in Delft, and I couldn't help noticing two related things. The first was the continuing popularity of bicycles, supported by a sophisticated network of bike paths that let you get anywhere you wanted. The second was most people in Delft were in noticeably better shape than many Phoenix residents.

Bicycle use and health are obviously related, but they also reflect good engineering design and policy choices. Thus, in the Netherlands, bicycle and automobile infrastructures are given equal standing and are planned as an integrated package. Here, however, we seem to actively discourage both walking and bicycle use (try bicycling to Sky Harbor, for example, or even walking from long-term parking to the US Airways terminal). It's almost like we're obese because we design for it.

It isn't that the Dutch don't like their cars – or that every Dutch city isn't well-equipped with fast-food outlets. They don't force people to give up what they want. Rather, in the best tradition of the free market, they build their environment to offer more, not less, choice. That way they can create a higher quality of life while encouraging good health and environmentally preferable behavior.

This offers an interesting vision for Phoenix, especially since we're blessed with great weather for much of the year (unlike Delft, where it rains a lot). As we accommodate continued growth, we should, as a strategy, aim to create more choices, rather than forcing people into single-use patterns. This way of thinking means designing urban spaces for cars and bicycles. But it also involves designing our systems to support the substitution of information and communication technology options for physical transportation. Thus, young people already increasingly substitute social networking on the Internet for driving to malls to meet each other, while their working peers substitute virtual offices for the frustrations of traditional rush hours. Good design and policy should encourage these modes as well.

What is critical in all these cases is that we approach infrastructure design as an opportunity to provide additional choice to each individual while meeting other social goals. Because this approach creates a higher quality of life, it is far more likely to be politically acceptable than the usual activist demand that everyone start giving up things that they are used to doing. Sure, providing additional choices doesn't have the same absolute guarantee of performance as mandates do – most obese Americans will not jump on bikes just because you give them a safe infrastructure, for example. But it will help build public support for, and achieve, environmental and public-health goals in a way that more adversarial and authoritarian approaches cannot. Arizona, Phoenix and all our residents – those here now and those yet to join us – will benefit if we do.

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