The Bicycle Uprising: Remembering the Midtown Bike Ban 25 Years Later

A 5-part series published by Streetsblog during August-September 2012

By Charles Komanoff

[This compendium of all five parts is available vis the link: http://www.komanoff.net/bicycle/Bicycle_Uprising.pdf.]

Part 1 (August 7, 2012) The Revolution of 1987

http://www.streetsblog.org/2012/08/07/the-bicycle-uprising-remembering-the-midtown-bike-ban-25-years-later/

You can sit at your computer all day long and you're never going to get anything done in terms of bringing down a government. What happens is when people got up and went into the streets. – NY Times Cairo correspondent David Kirkpatrick, interviewed on Fresh Air (NPR), July 18, 2012, A Reporter Looks at Where Egypt May Be Headed.

Twenty-five summers ago, something remarkable unfolded on the streets of New York City: Bicyclists by the hundreds and even thousands took to the avenues in a series of tumultuous demonstrations — part protest and part celebration — that galvanized bike activism.

The demonstrators encompassed the entire spectrum of NYC bicycling in the mid-to-late 1980s: daily bike commuters, weekend recreational riders, bike racers, cycling sympathizers, and bicycle messengers (who in those days were a powerful presence in Midtown traffic and who spearheaded the mid-summer actions). These disparate constituencies joined to resist a mayoral edict banning bicycle riding in the heart of Midtown Manhattan: on Fifth, Madison and Park Avenues from 31st to 59th Street.

The Midtown bike ban would operate from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday, clearly targeting the bike messengers whom the tabloid press and other opinion-mongers held responsible for the city's rampant traffic chaos and danger, but infringing on everyone's right to ride and declaring open season on the city's hardy but beleaguered bicycle community. Flanked by his police and transportation commissioners, Mayor Ed Koch stood on the steps of City Hall on July 22, 1987, to unveil the ban, which would take effect six weeks later, at the start of September, once signs had been posted and the legal niceties disposed of.

The outrage propelling the bicycle demonstrations was predictable enough. Singling out cyclists, a small part of the traffic stream, was ludicrous from a pragmatic standpoint and indefensible from a moral one. Moreover, targeting vulnerable, working-class bike messengers qualified as scapegoating and class warfare. The celebratory aspect was perhaps more surprising, as well as more enduring, for the summer of bicycle protest became an outpouring of frustration, hope and joy: frustration that cycling and cyclists had been maligned for so long; hope that other New Yorkers might stand with us; and the joy that explodes when any marginalized group pours into the streets on its own terms.

We had our terms indeed. Once or twice each week at around 5:30 p.m., the end of the messengers' workday, masses of cyclists, usually half a thousand and occasionally more, spread across Sixth Avenue and paraded the three miles from Houston Street to

Central Park South. Our stately pace, perhaps five mph, was slow enough that passersby could look past our bikes and see our bodies and faces. Walkers and joggers could join our ranks. We were slow enough that we could and did stop at red lights. Letting foot and auto traffic cross at the green was a stroke of genius. It certified cycling as city-friendly and kept the police from using "blocking traffic" as a pretext to bust the permit-less rides. As we streamed up Sixth Avenue, cries of "What do we want? Our streets back!" reverberated through the glass canyons, alternating with "Join us! Join us!" Before long, riders were holding signs and banners lampooning the mayor — "Koch Can't Ride" — and calling on New Yorkers to "Clear The Air: Cyclists and Pedestrians Unite!"

There were other actions too, most notably one at lunchtime in which cyclists snaked through the East 40s and 50s *on foot* to make the point that a midtown cycling ban would lead to sidewalk gridlock. It didn't take long for the demonstrations to spill from the streets and into the media. Just as the rarity of lethal cyclist-pedestrian collisions in the early 1980s seemed to stoke press outrage when one occurred, the seeming incongruity of gritty bike messengers stopping at crosswalks and demanding safe streets and clean air ignited waves of coverage. Their prior unpopularity aside, the cyclists were photogenic and made good copy. Soon, each day's *Post*, *Daily News*, and *Newsday* were plastered with pictures, columns and news stories reporting not just the latest protests but the treacherous conditions confronted by NYC cyclists and the "sweatshop of the streets" in which the messengers toiled. Before long, columnists were quoting cab and truck drivers who regarded bike messengers as fellow working stiffs, and occupational hazards like "dooring" entered the city's cultural lexicon. The lack of both workers' compensation for messengers and safe bike lanes for everyone who ventured onto city streets on two wheels became concerns for many New Yorkers and, in the minds of some, issues to be remedied before trying a draconian bike ban.

In late August, a New York State Supreme Court judge invalidated the ban on a technicality: the city hadn't published official notice. The 45-day notice period meant that the ban couldn't take effect until mid-October at the earliest, and City Hall threw in the towel. Press accounts credited the lawsuit, which had been mounted by Transportation Alternatives, but what gave the suit its legal standing and political currency was the "velorution" in the streets. Not only had Mayor Koch lost the battle of public opinion to the bicyclists — over 600 letters defending them poured into City Hall — but bicycling in New York City had acquired a human face, one that was exuberant, passionate and justice-seeking. Out-maneuvered in the streets and mocked in the media as Goliath beset by bike-riding Davids, the mayor who had entered politics as a liberal reformer quietly renounced his own handiwork.

Next week: The Rebirth of Transportation Alternatives

THE NEW YORK City Cyclist

PUBLISHED BY TRANSPORTATION ALTERNATIVES

OCT/NOV·1987

BIKERS BEAT BAN. WHAT NEXT?

The ban is dead -- for now.

On Sept. 9, NY State Supreme Court Justice Edward Lehner struck down the City's ban on bicycle riding on Fifth, Madison and Park Avenues. Judge Lehner ruled that the City had violated NYC Charter requirements by imposing the ban without allowing public comment. He granted a permanent injunction barring enforcement of the ban.

At press time, the City was weighing a judicial appeal, along with starting the required hearings -- a process that would probably take several months. Mayor Koch spoke a hard line: "The bike riders will find their victory is short-lived; they will be sorry." Still, public opinion seemed to be shifting against the ban and in favor of bicyclists, who had survived a frontal assault by City Hall and pressed their case in the courts, the media and the streets.

The ruling ends, for the time being, the first large-scale attempt by New York or any other major U.S. city to prohibit bicycling. The ban was in effect for only one hour, on Aug. 31, before the State Appellate Court affirmed Judge Lehner's Aug. 24 temporary restraining order halting the ban.

The judge acted in response to lawsuits against the ban by the Association of Messenger Services on behalf of messenger companies, and by a coalition of bicycle riders organized by Transportation Alternatives. The riders' suit was filed by T.A., the League of American Wheelmen, and 6 cyclists including T.A. president Charlie Komanoff, past president Charlie McCorkell, and messenger leader Stephen Athineos.

Seven Weeks of Protests

The ruling caps seven weeks of protests touched off by Mayor Koch's surprise July 22 announcement of a 3-month "experimental" ban on riding on the three avenues from 31rd to 59th Streets, between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. on weekdays, to have started in late August. Messengers, the prime target of the ban, responded with a series of street demonstrations that confounded the police, alarmed City Hall and affirmed riders' right to the streets.

Non-commercial riders -- commuters, racers, and city cyclists of all types -- were equally outraged. The ban was especially galling for T.A., which had been pressing City officials for cycling improvements and in June had presented a comprehensive safe-riding program to the NYC Department of Transportation (DOT). T.A. answered the ban by leading the letter-writing campaign to City officials (which as of Sept. 9 had produced 547 letters to the Mayor opposing the ban, vs. only 37 in favor), accelerating our safety education program, promoting and joining the messenger-led demonstrations, prodding the media to report the cyclist's point of view, and co-ordinating the riders' law-

(continued on page 15)

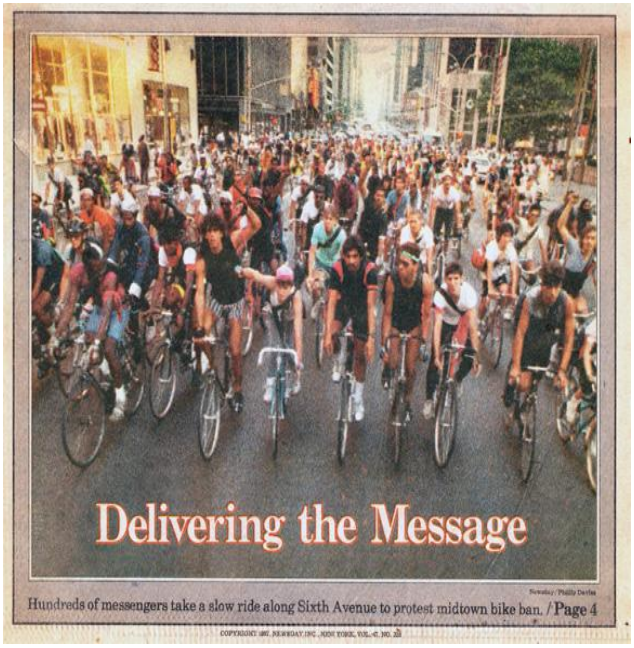
INSIDE

Part 2 (August 14, 2012)

http://www.streetsblog.org/2012/08/14/the-bicycle-uprising-part-2/

What would resonate for the cycling movement over the long haul was not just the victory over the Midtown bike ban but the insurgency itself, beginning with its fortuitous timing. The mid-eighties had been a low point for cycling advocacy. Over the prior two decades, biking in New York had grown in fits and starts, with three specific events raising cycling's profile. The first was in 1966, when Mayor John Lindsay banished

automobiles from the Central Park drives on Sundays and created the city's first large-scale convivial riding environment. Next was the 1973 Arab oil embargo, which sidelined cars and taxis at filling stations and validated petroleum-free human-powered travel. Third and last was the 11-day transit strike in April 1980, during which bike-commuting briefly tripled and began to be viewed as a legitimate means of navigating the city.



Newsday front-page photo, July, 1987. Steve Athineos, arm upraised, is at center-left.

But while these singularities put more New Yorkers on bikes, none ignited lasting expansion of the infrastructure to support them. In fact, amidst the city's ongoing fiscal crisis, key links in the bike network were taken away. With bridges badly deteriorating, entire lanes were shut down, and bike lanes on the river crossings were often the first to go — a stark reflection of the cycling community's political impotence as well as an impediment to its growth. And as the city's economy, but not its languishing mass transit system, rebounded from the 1970s slide, driving experienced its own boom. Increasingly, to ride a bike in these circumstances was not just to risk life and limb but to endure brutish and sometimes violent confrontations with drivers and their vehicles.

By 1987, cycling advocates badly needed a new cause to mobilize around. The bike ban turned out to be exactly that.

The Rebirth of T.A.

For years, New York activists and writers from Jane Jacobs and Paul Goodman to Ted Kheel and Pete Seeger had decried the automobile as an urban destroyer. Finally, in 1973, around the time of the oil price shock, an organization dedicated to reclaiming city streets from cars came into being — Transportation Alternatives. The primary founders were NYC Earth Day impresario Fred Kent (later the founder of Project for Public Spaces), urban planner (and, later, Greenmarket founder) Barry Benepe, civic gadfly Roger Herz, urban scholar-journalist David Gurin, and transportation engineer Brian Ketcham, who was then finalizing the Lindsay Administration's (and the country's first) "transportation control plan" intended to meet air quality standards by reducing auto travel.

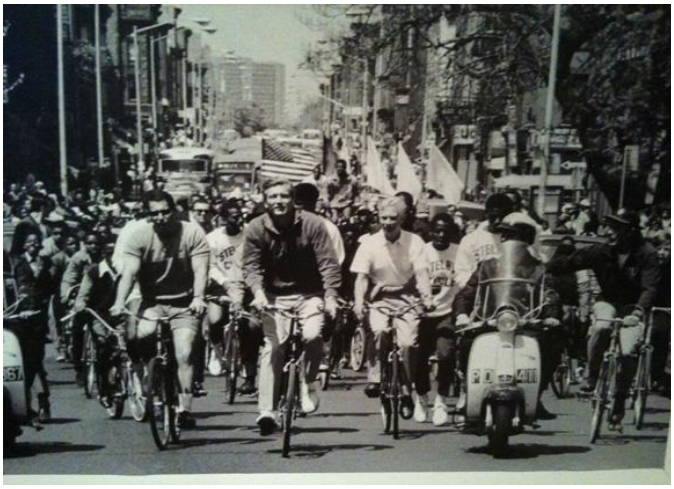
This quintet charged TA's tiny staff with selling the public on the notion of urban bicycle transportation while instructing City Hall in the nuts and bolts of bike-supportive infrastructure. Neither effort met with much success, in part because the innovative and cycle-friendly Lindsay Administration had been followed, in 1974, by the hidebound clubhouse regime of Mayor Abe Beame. And in a city whose highways, subways and electrical grid were literally crumbling — in which whole neighborhoods were being emptied and burned — political space for bicycling was scarce.

Still, there were some triumphs.

In one notable victory in 1979, advocates won exclusive access to the Queensboro Bridge South Outer Roadway. Progress, however, was subject to sudden reversals. In the early 1980s TA labored to parlay the upsurge in bicycle commuting during the transit strike into permanent bike lanes on avenues, rehabilitated paths for cyclists on bridges, and assured bicycle access to offices. But this effort foundered, most notably when a hastily installed and indifferently maintained bike lane on Sixth Avenue went underused and was removed. The public mood soured and city government largely abandoned the idea of investing in bicycle transportation.

During this low ebb, in 1986, new leadership came into Transportation Alternatives, motivated by apprehension that the widening backlash against scofflaw cycling (though not against dangerous driving, which was killing a half-dozen pedestrians a

week) would precipitate a crackdown. As it turned out, the revamped organization would have less than a year to begin reinvigorating itself — internally, with a database of members and volunteers, a bimonthly newsletter, and regular meetings; and externally, through dialogues with city police and transportation officials, campaigns for safer bridge access, and grassroots evangelizing on bike safety and advocacy, much of it from curbside lemonade stands ("Free For Bike Messengers") — before the city invoked the nuclear option and unveiled the Midtown bike ban in July 1987.



Mayor John Lindsay (center) and Parks Commissioner August Hecksher (in white shirt) lead ride up Sixth Ave. to Central Park, April 1, 1968.

TA assuredly did *not* direct the uprising against the ban. Leadership came from the ranks of those whose livelihood was directly threatened, most notably in the person of Steve Athineos, a 31-year-old cycle courier with training in communications. Athineos had a commanding street presence, a gift for truth-telling sound bites, and street cred built from three years of messengering. Much of the coordination, flyers and banners for the protest rides emanated from the East Houston Street storefront of Steve Stollman, an intensely driven barmaker and pamphleteer schooled in radical movements and plugged into pro-cycling and anti-auto activism throughout Europe, the U.S. and Canada. TA and other local cycling organizations like American Youth Hostel and the NY Cycle Club along with the national League of American Wheelmen (now League of American Bicyclists) worked their modest political contacts and publicized the protest rides, as did some bike shops, most notably Bicycle Habitat, whose owner-manager, Charlie McCorkell, a former TA president, had a keen sense of cycling's tenuous place in city politics.

Mostly, though, TA rode the wave and harvested the energy. For example, when the New York Times published an eloquent broadside, "Unfair to New York Bikers," by a young freelance writer named Michele Herman, TA recruited her into the organization as a volunteer writer (and, years later, as lead author of TA's NYC bike-plan book, *The Bicycle Blueprint*). Indeed, the floodtide unleashed in the uprising — from the boxes of pro-bicycling letters sent to City Hall (which we accessed through a FOIL request) and the daily papers, to spirited meetings and connections made at the protest rides — served as one big recruitment drive. When TA finally came to the fore, conceiving and prosecuting the lawsuit that overturned the ban, the reward was an infusion of credibility and, with it, new members, volunteers and contributors.

One constituency missing from the upwelling against the bike ban was the city's environmental community. As TA's new president, I thought I could count on the green movement's legal representation and political support. Not only was bicycling a form of green transportation *par excellence*, but for a dozen years I had served these groups as an economic consultant on energy issues. I received a rude awakening. None of the prominent environmental organizations were willing to petition City Hall to withdraw the pending ban, much less litigate against it, perhaps in part because the DOT Commissioner charged with administering the ban had been hired from their ranks. The deeper truth, though, was that cyclists were urban pariahs and bicycle transportation was too far on the fringe. In the suites as well as on the streets, we were on our own.

Next week: How the protests changed "the equation in the streets."

Part 3 (August 21, 2012)

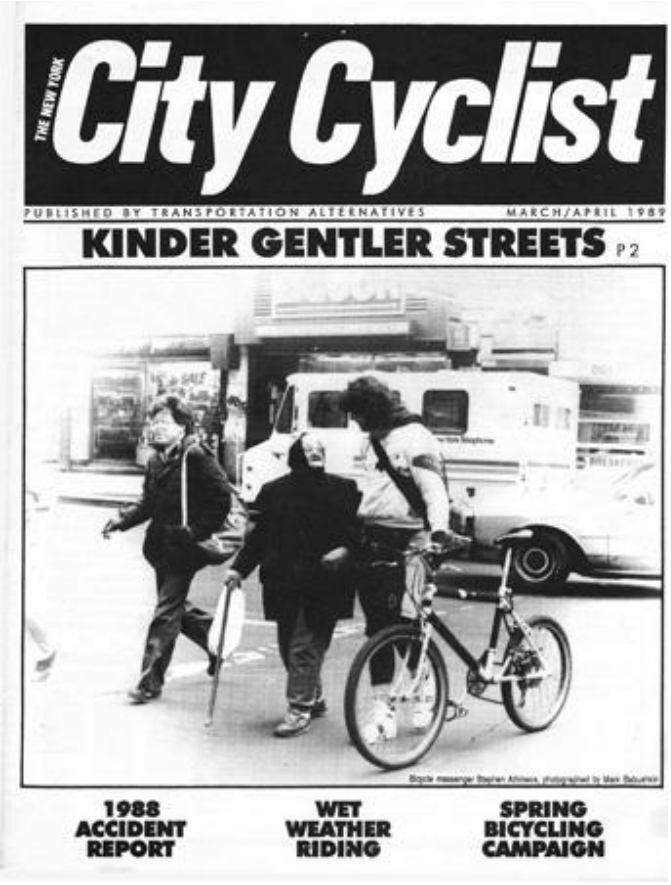
http://www.streetsblog.org/2012/08/21/the-bicycle-uprising-part-3/

A Quieter Revolution in the Streets

Then, as now, not every collision between a pedestrian and a bicyclist was reported to the police, and not every problematic bike-ped "interaction"

was a collision — some were frightening near-misses. But for much of the 1980s and 1990s, bike-ped collisions reported to the NYPD were collated into monthly citywide counts. The monthly and annual crash totals began falling in 1987, around the time of the bike ban protests, and they continued dropping, each year to the next, into the 1990s.

The reported number of collisions between bicycles and pedestrians peaked in 1986, at 631 citywide for the year. The crash figure for 1987 was around one hundred less, and the 1988 figure a hundred less than that. By 1992, only 298 bike-ped collisions were reported, less than half the number in 1986.



Bike messenger Steve Athineos and an older acquaintance pose on Seventh Avenue to get the message out about pedestrian-cyclist unity.

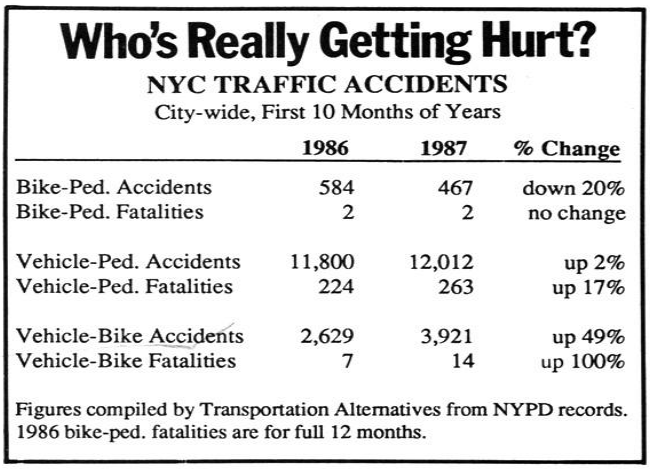
Neither these figures nor the positive trend they captured was ever reported in the press. They appeared only in TA's bimonthly City Cyclist magazine. Our source was a sympathetic NYPD clerk who phoned us the data each month, along with parallel tallies of cars striking pedestrians and bicycles. The differences were staggering: bike-ped collisions — the seeming horror that tabloid columnists had made into the *casus belli* for the bike ban — were outnumbered *several hundred-fold* by instances of drivers running into or over pedestrians. Likewise for fatalities: one pedestrian a year in the city was dying from a collision with a bike, on average, vs. nearly one *a day* killed by motor vehicles. (Bicycle-car collisions occupied a statistical middle ground, several times less frequent than pedestrians struck by cars but around ten times more common than pedestrians struck by bikes.)

Why did reported bike-pedestrian collisions begin falling in 1987, around the time of the proposed bike ban? A cynic would say that pedestrians simply gave up reporting these incidents, or that the cops were cooking the books (though in the "wrong," i.e. downward, direction). A more plausible as well as satisfying explanation is that pedestrians and bicycle riders began to mutually adapt — a process that was abetted by the bike ban protests. Through the animated demonstrations and supportive media coverage, messengers and other cyclists emerged as actual and sometimes sympathetic human beings who deserved to exist — and to be looked out for when crossing the street. For their part, cyclists felt empowered from seeing their stories told in the papers and from experiencing, if only for a few hours a week, the city's avenues as "our streets." Over months and even years, the ethos of pedestrian solidarity that suffused the protest rides and was codified in Transportation Alternatives' safety leaflet — originally composed for the lemonade stands and now handed out by the thousands — came to permeate the city's bike culture and to counter-balance the brutish state of the streets.

A Cycling Revolution

By the spring of 1988 the bike ban was dead. Whether it was done in by the drop in bicycle-pedestrian crashes, the promise of renewed protest rides, or cycling's newfound stature, bike advocates no longer had to look over their shoulder at City Hall. At least as importantly, cyclists had ceased to be everyone's favorite whipping boy. For the first time in years, you could speak up for cycling at a public forum and not be hooted down. And the 1987 uprising was generating resources for Transportation Alternatives: rising membership, a cadre of volunteers, and enough funds to hire as director — the first full-time staff in a decade — an energetic

and passionate economics grad student named Jon Orcutt. Having defeated the ban, TA and the larger NYC cycling community were ready to change what we called "the equation on the streets" from one that was massively stacked in favor of cars to one that was ecumenical and democratic.



Who's Really Getting Hurt?

NYC TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS

City-wide, First 10 Months of Years

	1986	1987	% Change
Bike-Ped. Accidents	584	467	down 20%
Bike-Ped. Fatalities	2	2	no change
Vehicle-Ped. Accidents	11,800	12,012	up 2%
Vehicle-Ped. Fatalities	224	263	up 17%
Vehicle-Bike Accidents	2,629	3,921	up 49%
Vehicle-Bike Fatalities	7	14	up 100%

Figures compiled by Transportation Alternatives from NYPD records. 1986 bike-ped. fatalities are for full 12 months.

CITY CYCLIST SPECIAL ISSUE JAN 1988

Comprehensive crash stats in City Cyclist gave the lie to the "bicycle menace" canard.

That I found myself helping to drive this movement, as president of TA's volunteer board, was largely accidental, if not downright bizarre. I had been a foot-soldier in anti-Vietnam War protests but had zero organizing experience. I had joined TA in the mid-seventies and dabbled in bike activism, only to immerse myself professionally in national energy policy work that was worlds apart from city streets. I was a wilderness hiker (on the day the Midtown bike ban was announced, I was summiting a peak in the Cascade Range, blissfully oblivious to the goings-on at City Hall) but had waited till my mid-twenties to learn to ride a bike.

I was recruited by Carl Hultberg, a Green activist with one foot in utopian movements and the other in TA. Carl, like myself, couldn't abide the scapegoating of cyclists for the city's traffic ills and longed to unite cyclists and pedestrians to take back the streets from cars. When I got his postcard invitation to an exploratory meeting, I was smarting from a humiliating encounter with a bus driver who had come within inches of punching me out after I cursed him for pinning me to the curb. I was also hungry for a new challenge and possessed by a vision. Even before I learned to ride a bike in 1973 — maybe the reason I overcame my embarrassment and finally did it — I had read and absorbed Paul Goodman ("Banning Private Cars from Manhattan" and "People or Personnel") and Ivan Illich ("Energy and Equity") and David Gurin's Village Voice dispatches heralding cyclists as the cutting edge of urban sustainability. These 1960s and 1970s ideals had rattled inside my head for a decade or more. Now I was ready to devote myself to them.

It was my and every other *velorutionary's* good fortune that the Midtown bike ban came along when it did. Organizing which would have required years got telescoped into months or weeks. People who hadn't taken to the streets in ages (or ever) discovered how uplifting it can be. Bicycle advocacy moved from abstraction to necessity.

Next week: The victories of 1988-1990.

Part 4 (August 28, 2012)

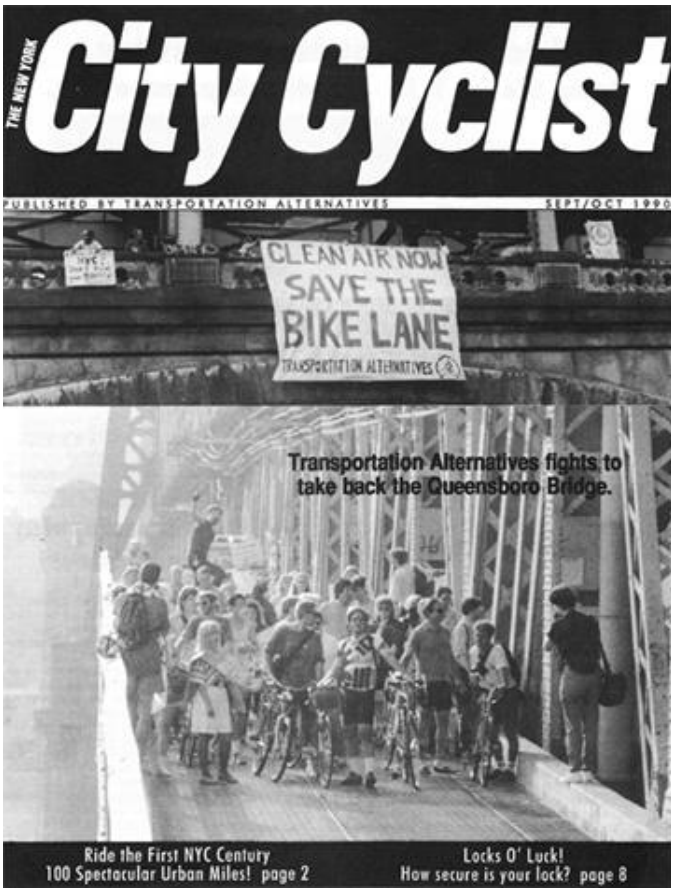
http://www.streetsblog.org/2012/08/28/the-bicycle-uprising-part-4/

The heightened political consciousness and enthusiasm for direct action that suffused the New York cycling community during the victorious campaign against the Midtown bike ban remained for years and led to enduring accomplishments:

"River Road" (1988-89) — Cyclists' next "access victory" overturned a rule banning cycling on all but weekend mornings on Henry Hudson Drive, a spectacular eight-mile ribbon of road sculpted out of the New Jersey Palisades and administered by the Palisades Interstate Park Commission. This campaign started with a pro forma request from Transportation Alternatives to the Commission's director to rescind the ban. But what got it rolling was an April 1988 TA ride in which park police arrested one cyclist and detained a dozen others who had dutifully attempted to exit by *walking* up mile-long Alpine Hill. Photos of the arrests snapped by a couple who had been politicized by the midtown protests were published in City Cyclist and made the campaign a cause célèbre for all cycling groups.

The park commissioners seemed sympathetic, and needed ammunition to override their director's adamant objections. The cycling community eagerly complied, with American Youth Hostel's Bike NY coordinator authoritatively detailing how New York-area cyclists could safely share the narrow road with cars, and a New York Cycle Club legal specialist

dismantling the director's overblown liability concerns. But just getting to that crucial vote took months of letter-writing and back-channel communications, including persistent lobbying that produced a Times editorial suggesting a trial period for shared use. During the month-long trial, in July 1989, cyclist volunteers distributed "rules of the road" flyers and marshaled the road, winning over the park director who then made the experiment permanent.



This cover of City Cyclist shows TA actions to reclaim the bike path on the Queensboro Bridge South Outer Roadway: a weekly march across the bridge (John Kaehny is at far left, facing crowd; Carl Hultberg is in back with arm raised), and a banner hung from the roadway viewed from First Avenue.

George Washington Bridge (1989-1990) – An archaic rule restricting bicycling to the GWB's north path and requiring cyclists to trudge up and down five staircases totaling 170 steps began to be enforced around the time of the Midtown bike ban, resulting in flurries of summonses for cycling on the ramped south path. Following the win on River Road, TA embarked on a campaign of quiet diplomacy with the Port Authority to gain legal access to the south path. We crunched bridge usage data and showed that wheelchair use of the south path wasn't nearly frequent enough to support a blanket prohibition against cycling. We won over a vocal opponent, a competitive runner from Washington Heights, by persuading him that legalizing cycling on the south path would deter aggro riding (here we drew on the downward trend of NYC bike-pedestrian crashes after beating back the Midtown bike ban) and would curb muggings on the bridge by adding "eyes on the path." And we mobilized TA members to write not just Port Authority staff but also the chair of the State Assembly committee who oversaw their operations.

The coup de grace was actually delivered by the Palisades Park Commission director. At our urging, he wrote to Port Authority staff to attest that opening River Road to cycling had been the right move all along. (A key step in winning his goodwill had been our accepting his conditions for River Road access, including a helmet requirement and a continued ban on using the serpentine Englewood Cliffs approach road.) The Port lifted the ban on cycling on the GWB's south path in 1990.

Clean Air Now or Never! (1988) – New York's air was much more polluted in the late eighties than today, and the number one reason, particularly at street level, was car exhaust. That non-polluting bikes could fulfill the same personal travel functions as pollution-spewing cars was a compelling argument for urban cycling, particularly after the summer of 1988, the hottest then on record, when New York baked in 100-degree heat, much of Yellowstone burned, and NASA climatologist James Hansen publicly pointed the finger of science at climate change from burning fossil fuels.

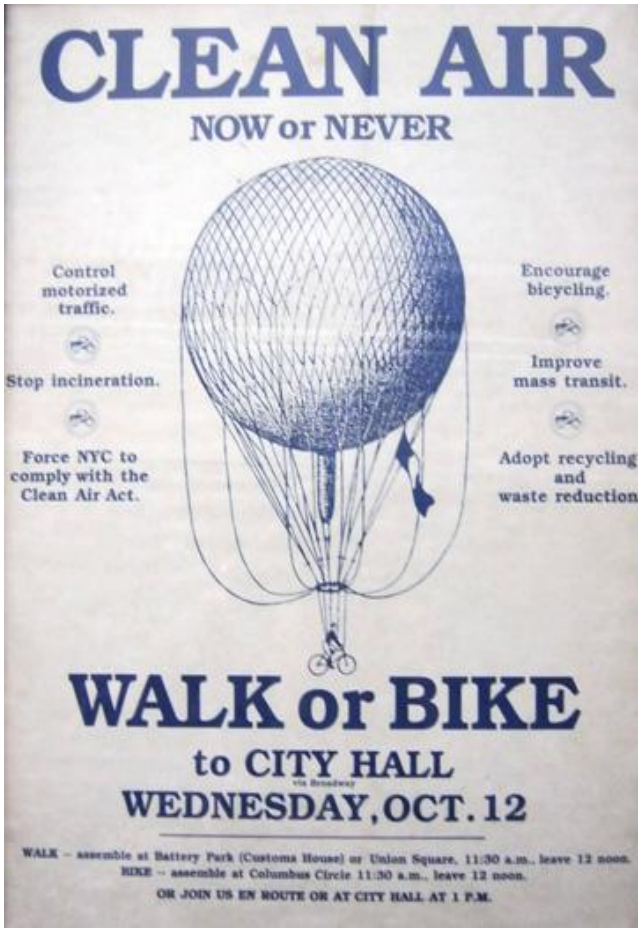
To dramatize the twin air and climate crises, TA staged a march and rally at City Hall. Like most of our protests, the action received little attention in the media — the eighties were pre-blogs and pre-Internet, of course, and we relied for communications and publicity on flyers, word of mouth, and City Cyclist, all volunteer-driven. Nevertheless, our October 1988 rally, with speeches from local and national activists and scientists, helped start the process of awakening the established environmental organizations to cycling. It also became a template for our 1989 Earth Day ride to the Exxon building on Sixth Avenue, where

Greenpeace demonstrators hailed us as heroes (this was a month after the Exxon Valdez dumped its crude into Alaska's Prince William Sound), and our February 1991 No Blood for Oil ride during the first Gulf War. While these actions didn't stop drilling or killing for oil, they helped enshrine TA as the city's pre-eminent grassroots green group. They also kept TA's volunteer base energized, which helped maintain vital but mundane work like midtown bike-traffic counts and newsletter distribution.

The Queensboro Bridge Bike Lane (1990-91) – Notwithstanding the actions and victories emanating from the 1987 bike ban uprising, cycling conditions in the city were barely improving as the 1980s gave way to the 1990s. If anything, rampant traffic gridlock and the new plague of massive, overpowered SUV's were making bike riding more perilous. Hopes that Mayor-elect David Dinkins would honor his 1989 campaign promises to expand the city's cycling infrastructure were dashed the following spring, when the DOT told cyclists the Queensboro Bridge South Outer Roadway bike path would be turned over to cars on weekday afternoons and evenings. The DOT van-shuttle alternative was cumbersome and unreliable, and stranded Queens bike commuters looked to TA.

The response was a series of Monday evening actions in which cyclists and pedestrians marched onto the South Outer Roadway and physically prevented cars from entering the lane. One leader of these demonstrations, John Kaehny, a young transplant from Denver living in Astoria, had a gift for articulating a vision of New York City as a place where bicycling could find political voice and be woven into the city's fabric. As word of Kaehny's oratory spread, the weekly actions became a happening, with the crowd swelling to 50 or 60 by summer. On one Monday evening, New Yorkers journeying up First Avenue gazed up at banners we had painted at TA director Jon Orcutt's Lower East Side loft and hung from the bridge railing: CLEAN AIR NOW and JUST ONE LANE.

The bust came on the last Monday in October 1990. The police permitted the group to turn back, but a half-dozen demonstrators, including Kaehny, Orcutt, and Ann Sullivan, who would soon succeed me as TA board president, chose arrest. At our trial for disorderly conduct that winter, the former DOT Commissioner Ross Sandler conceded under cross-examination that 40 years of adding auto lanes to Manhattan, whether by building new roads or appropriating sidewalks and bicycle paths, had only compounded gridlock and pollution. When the judge announced her verdict for the "QB 6" in March 1991, it was a stunner: She said our actions had served the public interest by safeguarding cyclists and pedestrians who might have ventured onto the bike path. It was the first "necessity" acquittal in New York State history. The New York Law Journal featured the case, and Newsday covered our victory in a feature story that cast bicycling advocates as valiant but quixotic.



TA's 1988 Clean Air rally raised cycling's standing among mainstream Greens.

Thanks to this advocacy and further demonstrations, the Queensboro Bridge was re-opened to bikes the following year, with access alternating between the South and North Outer Roadways. Not long after, the decrepit bike and pedestrian path on the Williamsburg Bridge was restored, following a TA-led campaign that included demonstrations with

Brooklyn Hasidim, and the long-closed path on the Manhattan Bridge was reinstated, with both bridges getting new lighting and ramps to replace stairs. The planning and investment that accomplished these steps didn't happen overnight, of course, but they were accelerated by relentless pressure from TA.

Next week: Auto-free NY, traffic pricing, and the epilogue.

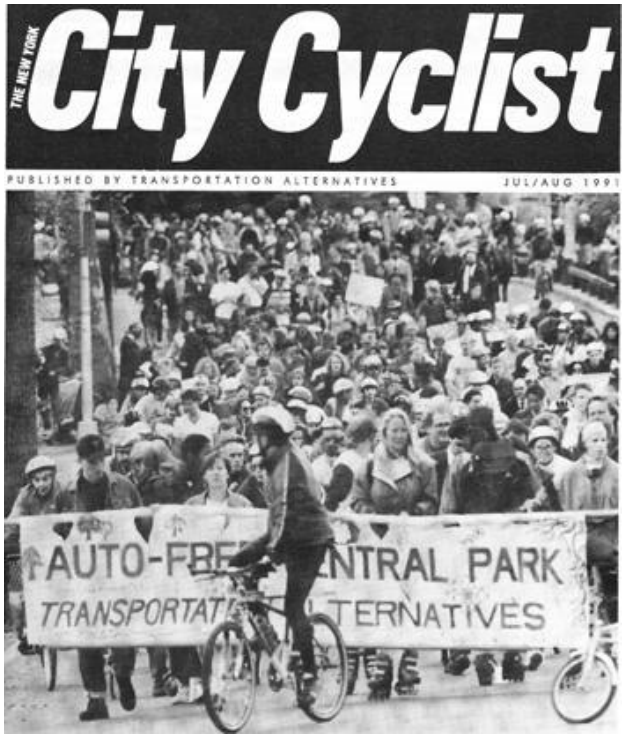
Part 5 (September 4, 2012)

http://www.streetsblog.org/2012/09/04/the-bicycle-uprising-part-v/

Auto-Free Cities Conference (1991) – Beginning with the 1987 bike ban uprising, New York City bike activists sent a charge through biking advocacy and bike culture around the country. During the late 1980s and early 1990s Transportation Alternatives board members and staff spoke and networked at bike gatherings in San Francisco, Berkeley-Oakland, Chicago and Boston and at the biennial "Pro-Bike" conferences in Washington (1990), Montreal (1992) and Portland, Oregon (1994), and contributed dozens of articles to local and national cycling newsletters and 'zines. What probably most inspired our fellow cycling advocates was not our particular string of victories but the ardor and creativity of our campaigns and our articulation of cycling as environmental, political and communitarian. For many, NYC-style bike activism came to embody a more authentic and appealing model than the cultish "Effective Cycling" ideology that demanded cyclists stifle disdain for car culture and view themselves as drivers. We portrayed cycling as not just a sport or even a means of transport but a basis for organizing one's city.

Key to this holistic approach was an insistence on minimizing the presence of private automobiles in cities. In 1988, TA took into its ranks Auto-Free New York, a visionary group founded and led by civil engineer and city planner George Haikalis to articulate and exploit the synergies between road pricing, fewer cars, better transit, and more space for walking and cycling. In its newsletter, Auto-Free Press, and in lectures, reports and demonstrations, AFNY prodded believers and skeptics alike to "explore and achieve the upper limit of 'devehicularization' of our nation's largest city."

The grandest expression of AFNY's vision was the "International Auto-Free Cities" conference that Transportation Alternatives convened at NYU in 1991. For two days in May, illustrious thinkers and writers like Worldwatch Institute founder Lester Brown, "Asphalt Nation" author Jane Holtz Kay, and Columbia University Professor Bill Vickrey — later awarded the Nobel Prize in economics for pioneering the field of traffic pricing — rubbed shoulders with bike messengers, cycling advocates and anti-car activists from across the U.S. and Canada. The energy was so infectious that an official with the NYC Transit Authority went off script and pledged that his agency would scrap its blanket prohibition against bringing bikes onto subways. The conference altered my life and career as well. Vickrey's presentation, and a parallel one by engineer-analyst (and TA co-founder) Brian Ketcham on the societal costs of auto use, launched me on my present path as quantifier and advocate for traffic pricing.



April 19, 1991: 400 walkers, runners, skaters and cyclists occupy the loop road to kick off TA's Auto-Free Central Park campaign.

Epilogue

Carl Hultberg and others from the "1987 generation" began rotating off the Transportation Alternatives board in 1988-89. Board member Peter Meitzler moved to San Francisco and played a key role in re-energizing the SF Bicycle Coalition. I stepped down

as TA president at the start of 1992 and devoted myself to curating and editing TA's *Bicycle Blueprint*book. My departure from the board in 1994 drew the curtain on the core of activists who had been raised up by the campaign against the Midtown bike ban.

The May 3-4, 1991 Auto-Free Cities conference was a high mark in TA's visionary urban advocacy.

Some of the uprising's energy and grit remained imprinted, as it were, in TA's DNA. Street actions continued, backed by hard-hitting analyses, strategic alliances with supportive elected officials, and growing press hits. TA's car-free Central and Prospect Park campaigns goaded city officials to institute steadily escalating expansions of car-free hours at both parks. TA protests helped prompt the Daily News to spotlight Queens Boulevard as the "boulevard of death" and raised consciousness about car violence across the city. TA partnerships with community groups created and promoted the concept of safe routes to schools, working mainly in poor neighborhoods that hadn't been touched by livable streets activism.

The landscape for bike-pedestrian advocacy was evolving. In 1991, a nationwide alliance of local activists, national environmental groups and urban advocates pushed through federal legislation that for the first time made federal transportation money available for bike and pedestrian enhancements. TA recruited allies in city and state government who directed big bucks to innovative infrastructure, most notably the Hudson River Greenway but also pedestrian improvements in Herald Square that later became a template for public plazas in Times Square and along Broadway.

At the same time, however, the Giuliani Administration was freezing out organizing of any sort and cracking down on street demonstrations. In the cycling community, the torch of unsanctioned civil protest — which brought people onto the streets, "permitted" or not (e.g., in Critical Mass rides) — began to pass to Time's Up, the "direct action environmental organization" that also turned 25 this year. Beginning in 1996, an ad hoc group that included Time's Up founder-director Bill DiPaola, former TA board member Peter Meitzler and myself launched the Street Memorial project, which ultimately stenciled over two hundred "Killed By Automobile" body outlines on streets and sidewalks where pedestrians and cyclists had been run over by drivers, and produced the path-breaking report of the same name.

Circa 2006-2007, a new era arrived with the advent of Streetsblog and its innovative framing of advocacy for cycling, walking, public spaces and transit under the common rubric of Livable Streets; with an enlarged funding base for Transportation Alternatives that greatly expanded its visibility and reach; and with Mayor Bloomberg's appointment of Janette Sadik-Khan as NYC Transportation Commissioner. Of course, the *sine qua non* of auto-free travel in New York City has been the revitalization of public transit, championed by Gene Russianoff's Straphangers Campaign and financed by an array of dedicated taxes that since the early

1980s have generated tens of billions of dollars to rehabilitate, modernize and expand subways, buses and commuter rail.

By my estimates, the number of cycling trips in the five boroughs in 2011 was twice that of a half-dozen years before, and two-and-a-half times the level in 1987, and accounts for more than two percent of "vehicle" miles traveled in the five boroughs. However, the advent of digital communication has decimated bike-messengering, with couriers' share of bike trips plummeting more than ten-fold to just three percent (I estimate that food delivery now accounts for around 17 percent of NYC bicycle trips). Overall cycling would have grown even more spectacularly if not for the NYPD's systemic indifference to protecting vulnerable street users' lawful right-of-way.

Nevertheless, cycling's place on New York's streets and in its culture and economy has broadened remarkably since the bike ban uprising and since Transportation Alternatives published the *Bicycle Blueprint* with the subtitle, "A Plan to Bring Bicycling into the Mainstream in New York City." With one in six New Yorkers telling the New York Times they ride at least once a week, with ridership poised to grow further once bike-share comes on line, and with bicycling increasingly valued for making New York City more healthy, livable and vibrant, cycling is finally — a quarter-century after cyclists vanquished the Midtown bike ban — entering the city's mainstream.

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Source documents that illuminate this series are available at Komanoff.net. The author thanks Christopher Ketcham, Keegan Stephan, David Perry and Streetsblog editor-in-chief Ben Fried for editorial suggestions and guidance.

Links for this series

Part 1 (August 7, 2012)

The definitive participant's account of the Bike Ban uprising is Mary Frances Dunham's essay "Fifth, Park and Madison" published in the League of American Bicyclists magazine in 1989 and re-published in the Bicycle Blueprint.

Part 2 (August 14, 2012)

Michele Herman's Aug. 8, 1987 NY Times op-ed, "Unfair to New York Bikers," eloquently crystallized utilitarian cyclists' tenuous status in New York City's street hierarchy.

Part 3 (August 21, 2012)

The classic essay "Banning Cars from Manhattan" by scholar-activist-author Paul Goodman and his architect brother Percival originally appeared in *Dissent* (Summer 1961) and was reprinted in Paul Goodman's *Utopian Essays and Practical Proposals* (Random House, 1962). It is available **here**.

Part 4 (August 28, 2012)

The trial of the "QB6" had this legal title: Criminal Court, City of New York, New York County, Jury 10.

The PEOPLE of the State of New York v. John GRAY, John Kaehny, Charles Komanoff, Stephen Kretzmann, Jonathan Orcutt and Ann Sullivan, Defendants. March 14, 1991.

Westlaw citation:
Page 150 Misc.2d 852, 571 N.Y.S.2d 851
(Cite as: 150 Misc.2d 852, 571 N.Y.S.2d 851)

Part 5 (Sept. 4, 2012)

"KILLED BY AUTOMOBILE" (the 60-page 1999 booklet by Right Of Way) is available here:

My spreadsheet estimating NYC bicycle trips and miles traveled may be downloaded via this link.

The NY Times survey reporting that one in six New Yorkers rode a bicycle in the past week was covered in Streetsblog in August, 2012.