



Transportation Alternatives

1400 Strong And Growing

Downtown Talks To A Courageous Group Of People

by Jack Brown

Transportation Alternatives has been serving as a New York bicycling advocacy group since 1973. In the dark cycling days of the mid '80s Charles Komanoff became president. Since 1986 the membership has grown rapidly to nearly 1400. Komanoff is a 1968 graduate of Harvard College and an internationally recognized consultant and author on "the economics and environmental impacts of energy supply and demand" with emphasis on the nuclear and coal industries.

Executive Director John Orcutt is a graduate of Bates College. He is a former bike mechanic and collector and lives on Avenue C. Acting locally and thinking globally, T.A. employs street savvy and a sophisticated use of research, media and political activism. Combining a "visionary idealism with a hard-edge realism, T.A. endeavors to" strengthen the link between the cycling and environmental communities and between increased cycling and reduced motor vehicle use.

I talked recently with Komanoff, Orcutt and Cindy Arlinsky, executive administrator for T.A.

Downtown: Charlie, from the high-powered realm of an internationally recognized author and consultant, why bikes? And what led you to Transportation Alternatives?

T.A. ...I think working for bikes is something I'd wanted to do for a really long time. And what kept me from it was that I was working, for years, full time and overtime in the antinuclear power movement. Finally, about 1986, that work in the safe energy area, I don't want to say it was running out of steam, but whatever major intellectual and political contribution I could make, I had pretty much made it. So, frankly, I was looking for something different to do.

You spoke about a visceral feeling.

T.A. For years, like other cyclists, I was tired of seeing cycling ignored, but seeing cyclists get kicked around in the media as well as get kicked around on the streets... In 1986 there was a handhold that got provided for me through the N.Y. Greens and Carl Hultberg in particular. After hanging out with the Greens in the Summer of 86, it turned out that there was a vacuum at Transportation Alternatives. Here was this group that had accomplished an awful lot in the '70s, had brought some real victories and had fought the good fight for bicyclist and was kind of running out of steam itself... So another person and I offered to get involved. When I did that in September of 1986 I never dreamed that it would fill up my life in the way it has. But I'm grateful that it has, because I think the best thing I could possibly be doing is standing up for bicyclists in New York and by implication, for bicyclists all over the world.

Could you describe the fight against Mayor Koch's bike ban,

which seems to have been a catalyst for cyclists' rights in 1987.

T.A. It was the bike messengers who spearheaded the fight. It was the bike messengers who spontaneously organized as soon as the ban was announced in late July of 87, and began marching and riding every evening from lower Sixth Avenue up to Central Park. What T.A. did was to provide an organizational umbrella to support that energy; to help some of that energy reach the media; to file a lawsuit which provided a judicial and political forum for that energy.

What would you say the payoff has been?

T.A. There have been a multitude of payoffs—all of them positive. One is the bicycling community, where there had been a lot of internecine warfare, it really coalesced. The messengers, the commuters, the recreational riders all came together. Second it galvanized T.A. The ban generated a tremendous amount of energy and enthusiasm. Volunteers came out. People had things to do. The

bikes and all other vehicles. 1988 and 1989 we found that bikes were 8 percent of vehicles in motion on major Manhattan avenues. By 1990 it had risen to 10 percent.

How many bikes are in use every day?

The figure we use is 75,000: 5,000 messengers, for practical reasons, in the five boroughs each day.

What are you looking for as a desirable figure for bikes?

In the next 10 years it would be nice to get up to 15 percent of vehicles city-wide.

That would be a sevenfold increase.

The transformation to bicycling would protect the environment in other ways. Not least of which is the personal awareness of responsibility that people take for their environment and society when you get them out from an automobile where you participate in this mindless, endless consumer culture.

What other campaigns has T.A. undertaken in the last couple of

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membership began to spurt. Our growth and strength stem tremendously from that period. Third, we had a platform to begin talking about clean air and who has a right to the streets.

When bike messengers carry signs "Ban limos not bikes," there's a very powerful message there. The outside world saw it and we saw it. Number four, there was an empowerment we all felt as cyclists. After years of getting the shit kicked out of us on the street and in the media, we were empowered. We were something. We could control the streets. We could force the politicians to listen to us and this was tremendously important. I think this gave cyclists the internal strength to ride more considerably. To give the benefit of the doubt to the pedestrian. And this has contributed to the consistent decline in bike/ped. accidents. Also pedestrians reciprocated and saw us as being part of the traffic mix. Not just something that came out of nowhere.

You've done statistical work on this.

T.A. We've conducted surveys with volunteers counting traffic. Counting

years?

After the bike ban and the long hot Summer of '88 which saw the epic journey of the garbage barge and NASA scientist James Hansen come out and say the greenhouse effect was happening, T.A. felt it had the opportunity to go on the offensive with a clean air campaign. To do this we organized a demonstration at City Hall in October of '88. We gained the endorsement of many of the big environmental groups as well as some of the grass roots groups around. It gave us the opportunity to talk to everybody about mobilizing for clean air. Not just fighting Westway, but talking across the board about what we were going to do to clean up the air. Transportation Alternatives means a range of things. Bicycle transportation is the one we personally like the best.

There's also mass transit and walking. The clean air rally pointed out that it wasn't only getting bikes over bridges, but that there had been clean air legislation for 17 or 18 years and despite this the air was continuing to get worse. Then a

noted pedestrian and mass transit advocate came to us and said he wanted to get an advocacy activist group going to further auto reduction. So under the umbrella of T.A. George Haikalis began Auto-Free New York.

What do they suggest to de-vehicularize New York?

They have a four-year plan to rescue the City from overdependence on the private car. They have 15 strategies the City Administration can begin. The best known is Auto-Free Central Park.

Also you were involved in River Road and the George Washington Bridge.

Those are two specific bike access campaigns waged since about the close of the bike ban till the present. We gained access to River Road, a beautiful rolling roadway just over the George Washington Bridge in Palisades Park. People were on the road in droves prior to legal access in 1989, but they were subject to harassment by the police.

How did you manage to win access?

Pressure on the Palisades Park board. Unrelenting pressure for three years. We should probably mention the bust. T.A. organized an informal ride. It just so happened that the cops stopped that ride. Twelve of us got taken into custody. One of our members gestured with his hands and the cops used this as an excuse to infer he was doing something violent. They slapped him in the head, hit him in the back, and knocked him to the ground, handcuffed him and charged him with assaulting a police officer. This helped galvanize T.A.

This is what you term direct action, even though it may have been inadvertent.

Exactly.

So what are some of the other strategies T.A. employs to further the bicycling community?

We coordinated pressure with American Youth Hostels and the New York Cycling Club. With River Road we used a whole range of tactics including months of arm twisting to get *The New York Times* to write a little editorial urging Palisades Park people to try road sharing. That helped along with letters from our active, engaged, aroused members to board members or legislators who have oversight over the board. This ultimately induced the board to allow us to come to a meeting. They had legal concerns. We got an attorney, who is a member of the New York Cycle Club to do a brilliant detailed legal analysis of liability issues to show their concerns were overblown and groundless. The amount of work that can be involved in something which ought to be simple can be immense.

Would give us a preview of the Bicycle Blue Print scheduled for release in Spring of 1991.

For the first time, in a relatively terse document of 60-80 pages, it's going to be

