

Victory in Idaho Speaks to Power of Grassroots

Biking and walking just saw a major win in Idaho.

Under the new transportation bill (MAP-21), some funding for local walking and biking improvements under the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) became optional for states, creating a big opportunity — and challenge.

If the higher-ups in state transportation agencies decided to preserve TAP funds, small towns and cities would get the chance to access valuable dollars to make neighborhoods safer for kids and adults walking and biking. If state officials decided to nix the funds, the tiny pool of dollars that would build sidewalks, crosswalks and bikeways in small towns could be redirected to large highway projects.

In Idaho, advocates had just a few months to convince the seven representatives serving on the Board of Directors at the Idaho Transportation Department that biking and walking funds are vitally important. When we last checked in with Cynthia in January (link:

http://www.peoplepoweredmovement.org/site/index.php/site/blog/idaho_wyoming_groups_use_advocacy_advance_grants_to_protect_biking_and_walk/), advocates were in the midst of a campaign to preserve funds from the Transportation Alternatives Program. As the board dragged its feet on a final decision, advocates were unsure just how successful their campaign would be.

Now, four months later, Cynthia Gibson, Executive Director of the Idaho Pedestrian and Bicycle Alliance, is thrilled to declare victory. Idaho's higher-ups voted to preserve Transportation Alternatives funds for local biking and walking projects.

Organizing grassroots, contacting legislators

So how did they do it? Working closely with her board — including board president Molly O Reilly — and with partners throughout the state, Cynthia executed a well-designed campaign to mobilize grassroots leaders to convince the Idaho Transportation Board to fully fund biking and walking.

“We knew the Board members would listen to their constituents and legislators,” Cynthia said, “so we traveled out to communities who previously received biking and walking funds and understood how they had bettered their community.”

Cynthia's targeted travels brought her to small cities and towns all over the state — check out this map to see where the campaign brought her. (LINK: <http://goo.gl/maps/L7jia>)

In each community, Cynthia found the engaged citizens who had seen how active transportation improvements can bring a main street back to life or make a neighborhood safer for students walking to school.

“We were talking to mayors and local community groups,” Cynthia said. “They understood how biking and walking had bettered their communities, so we asked them to voice their concerns to their representative.”

These local champions wrote the transportation board to let them know about the importance of active transportation funds.

At the same time, Idaho Pedestrian and Bicycle Association worked to discuss the issue with state legislators. Cynthia spent time meeting with lawmakers, and also collaborated with state partners to increase influence.

“We partnered with the Conservation Voters of Idaho, who had state legislative connections,” said Cynthia. “So we were out talking to legislators, who were receiving phone calls and letters from mayors and community groups.”

Visible progress

Over time, the group’s efforts began to have a noticeable effect.

“Gradually, it seemed like board members’ attitudes were changing,” Cynthia recalled. “Some of the board members who were staunch opponents started talking differently.”

“When we started this, they were saying ‘biking and sidewalks? There’s no money for that, we don’t have the funds,’” said Cynthia. “That’s not what they were saying five months later. Now they were concerned with money coming in to local communities. They picked up information and saw things differently.”

Ultimately, after months of hard work, the board voted to preserve Transportation Alternative Program funds. The board’s decision was a thrilling conclusion to a campaign that gradually picked up steam.

“It’s a movement,” Cynthia said. “It’s just picking up momentum. The legislators are hearing about us and the discussions are happening more often.”

Lessons Learned

Cynthia had plenty of suggestions for advocates in other areas of the country. Idaho’s campaign victory is a testament to the value of face-to-face meetings and building grassroots support.

“You can never give up on grassroots,” said Cynthia. “It’s all about reaching out to the communities.”

Strategic partnerships were essential, too.

“We’re trying to partner with people who can help us and who we can also help,” she explained. “Through our partnership with the Conservation Voters of Idaho, we were able to make a lot of legislative connections.”

Another lesson: be persistent.

“It’s annoying and you just have to keep chipping away at it,” Cynthia said. “Be persistent and just don’t give up.”

“When all this kept going on and on and on, I just hung in there,” she recalled. “I’d get frustrated, and [Idaho Bicycle and Pedestrian Alliance board president] Molly said, ‘just keep going.’ I kept attending meetings and we kept pushing.”