

Lobbying & Law - How Bike Lobbying Got Into High Gear

08-13-2005

Brian Friel ([Email this author](#))

© National Journal Group, Inc.

In 2002, John Burke, the fit, middle-aged president of Trek Bikes, a manufacturer based in Waterloo, Wis., hobbled to the podium at the Bicycle Business Leadership Conference wearing makeup designed to make him look old. Burke addressed the leaders of the \$5.5 billion-a-year cycling industry as if he were looking back from the year 2030. Bicycling had undergone a renaissance over the past 30 years, he said, and now boasted millions of new riders, hundreds of thousands of miles of paved bike paths, and billions of dollars of business for bicycle dealers and suppliers, whose sales had been stagnating at the turn of the century.

Cycling's revitalization began, Burke said in his back-from-the-future speech, when industry leaders and bicycle rider groups pooled their money and clout in 2002 to lobby the federal government to invest more money in bike paths and to adopt bike-friendly policies. The advocacy effort -- which was focused on the federal highway and mass transit bill then in Congress -- kick-started the industry's good fortunes.

Bicycle advocates say that Burke's speech of three years ago electrified the audience and helped to spur a fractured industry to fund a first-of-its-kind \$2 million campaign lobbying Congress to use the highway bill to promote bicycling. With those dollars -- and with the help of such key lawmakers as House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee ranking member **James Oberstar**, D-Minn. -- bicyclists mounted their most sophisticated lobbying effort in Washington to date.

The \$286.5 billion highway bill, which President Bush signed into law on August 10, may steer as much as \$4 billion into federal funding of bike paths and bike-related programs over the next five years. Rep. **Earl Blumenauer**, D-Ore., has called the 2005 highway bill "the best bicycle bill in history."

"This was unprecedented in the bicycling business," said Tim Blumenthal, executive director of Bikes Belong, the industry coalition that Burke helped to organize. "Never had the industry rallied behind one cause and put its competitive instincts aside to try to create a better environment for people to ride bikes."

Several factors explain the rise of the bicycle lobby, but the key federal development was passage of the 1991 highway bill that opened the federal Highway Trust Fund to bicyclists. The law created a program called Transportation Enhancements, which required states to spend some of their highway dollars on paths for pedestrians and bicyclists, on roadside landscaping, and on other non-road projects. The 1998 highway bill continued the program, and states eventually spent some \$3 billion on bike and pedestrian paths through the Transportation Enhancements program and other provisions in the 1991 and 1998 laws.

Still, the bicycle industry -- which sells 18 million bikes a year in the United States -- was barely involved in either of those reauthorizations. The lobbying work was left mostly to user groups such as the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy and the League of American Bicyclists -- grassroots membership organizations with little cash to spend on influence efforts. "Originally, we fought almost clandestinely," said Marianne Fowler, senior vice president for policy at Washington-based Rails-to-Trails. "Part of our early struggle was keeping the enhancements program under wraps so it wouldn't be taken out" of the transportation bills.

Back then, Fowler and other lobbyists worked with the few bicycle enthusiasts in Congress --

Oberstar and then-Sens. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, D-N.Y., and John Chafee, R-R.I. -- to keep the bike-friendly provisions in the highway bill. After the 1998 bill passed, the bicycle groups decided to get more serious about their lobbying.

With Burke taking the lead, the industry formed the Bikes Belong coalition, which financed America Bikes, a coordinated advocacy organization that also included bicycle user groups. Meeting two years before the 1998 bill was due to expire, the leaders of America Bikes, representing eight organizations, agreed to several priorities for the next reauthorization effort: Expand existing bike-friendly programs; push for a new "Safe Routes to School" program to make it easier for children to walk or bike to school; and establish a "Complete Streets" policy that would factor in the needs of pedestrians and cyclists in decision-making about major road projects.

Burke understood politics better than most in the bicycle industry, and his 2002 speech helped Bikes Belong raise \$2 million for the reauthorization lobbying effort. Burke also has stellar connections. As a member of the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, he has biked with President Bush. In fact, he gave Bush a mountain bike after the president switched from running to biking for exercise. Also, Lance Armstrong rides Trek bikes.

The industry group spent about half of its money on grants to local communities for bike trails and other projects. Blumenthal said the grants went to projects that could help demonstrate to key members of Congress the popularity of bike trails in their districts. "We wanted to show them what a good bike facility looked like and how positively people in the community reacted," Blumenthal said.

Bicycling manufacturers and suppliers formed a political action committee -- Bikes PAC -- which contributed about \$12,750 to members of Congress in the 2004 election cycle. Contributions were evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats, most of whom served on the key transportation committees in the House and Senate. Although relatively small, the PAC's contributions helped to build the perception, as Blumenthal put it, "that we're a movement that is growing more sophisticated, that we understand the process, that we're a player now."

Bikes Belong also put \$1 million into the America Bikes coalition to help pay for grassroots lobbying and for work on Capitol Hill. Every year since 2001, America Bikes has held a National Bike Summit in Washington, bringing in enthusiasts and business owners to talk with members of Congress. The coalition hired a full-time lobbyist, Martha Roskowski, who had formerly organized successful biking efforts in Colorado. Roskowski began working with other lobbyists, including Fowler of Rails-to-Trails and Andy Clarke, executive director of the League of American Bicyclists.

A major test of the coalition's influence came in the summer of 2003 when **Ernest Istook**, R-Okla., chairman of the House Appropriations Committee's transportation panel, spearheaded an effort to eliminate funding for the Transportation Enhancements program. Istook argued that because Highway Trust Fund money comes from motorists' gas taxes, the money should go to highways. Istook shepherded his proposal through the Appropriations Committee -- just before the August recess two years ago. When members of Congress went home for summer break, bicycle advocates were ready to meet them.

The Thunderhead Alliance, an Arizona-based nonprofit that helps organize local bicycle advocates and provides advocacy training, took a lead role that August in helping bicycle supporters across the country argue for the enhancements program. On Capitol Hill, the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy enlisted the aid of Rep. Tom Petri, R-Wis., chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee's subcommittee on highways. Petri pushed for an amendment to that year's appropriations bill to save the enhancements program. Supporters even got Lance Armstrong's mother to send a letter to Republican women in Congress describing how she used to worry whenever her son biked on busy Texas roads loaded with cars and trucks.

The Conservancy's Fowler recalls the crucial House floor vote on September 4, 2003. She got her hopes up when an early bevy of green lights in favor of Petri's amendment appeared on the vote board -- but then, a slew of red lights popped up. When several key Republicans voted yes, many of the red lights switched to green. The final vote to save the Transportation Enhancements program was 327-90, a major bipartisan victory for bike advocates.

"It was an important individual vote to win, but looking back, it was also incredibly important in saying, 'Look, we're a force to be reckoned with,' " Clarke said.

With the enhancements program safe, bike advocates used the next two years to push for their other priorities in the highway bill. The Safe Routes to School program was a relatively easy sell, since Oberstar -- the key champion of the program -- was the top House Democratic negotiator on the highway bill. Working with individual members of Congress, bike advocates helped to secure a total of \$1 billion in bicycle and pedestrian projects, according to a review of a database compiled by Taxpayers for Common Sense on transportation projects that were earmarked in the just-passed highway bill at the request of members of Congress.

Bike advocates, in addition to developing their grassroots capabilities and starting a PAC, also hired the lobbying firm Tongour, Simpson Holsclaw this year. The firm, founded by former Sen. Alan Simpson, R-Wyo., helped the bicycling community build and strengthen its ties to Senate Republicans. Tongour, Simpson also helped the advocates strategize on when activating the grassroots would do the most good, rather than just annoy senators.

Bike advocates are now institutionalizing the lessons they learned during this year's reauthorization fight. Bikes Belong will keep pushing for the construction of as many trails as possible in the coming years. Meanwhile, the America Bikes coalition will soon begin to plot strategies for the 2009 highway bill. One target: the Complete Streets policy for road-building, which did not make it into this year's bill.

But for now, bike advocates are celebrating their success in the 2005 transportation bill, which Congress passed five days after Lance Armstrong won his record seventh Tour de France.

"There's a great pride in bicycling now," Fowler said.