

10 Strategies for Effective Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committees

By Ben Gomberg

Picture your bicycle or pedestrian advisory committee with well-qualified, committed members, focused on important projects, working together in a congenial atmosphere and having real impact within the political realm. Impossible? Then consider these strategies.

- (1) **Recruitment** – Recruit dynamic members and you’ll generate a tremendous return on your investment! Invite prospective members to participate in meetings and projects. They’ll learn how the committee works and you can assess their abilities and commitment.
Prepare a “job description” summarizing member responsibilities, time commitments, attendance requirements, etc. In Seattle, committee members are expected to lead one project, represent their community on a task force, attend all committee meetings and serve a minimum two-year term.
- (2) **Member Selection** – Look for people with a record of community involvement, who work well with groups and with government. Avoid people with narrow, back-yard interests and hard-line positions. Interview applicants as you would prospective employees.
- (3) **Orientation** – “One of the best ways to improve or maintain a committee’s productive capacity is to provide new appointees with a solid orientation immediately upon appointment. The orientation should cover some combination of the following topics: the committee’s role, including duties and responsibilities, how the committee is organized, how the committee works, a review of the committee’s structure, policies and bylaws, and a review of the committee’s relationship with citizens, staff and the governing body.” (From “Enhancing Your Commission’s Productivity,” by Michael Chandler, *Planning Commissioners Journal*, Summer 1994.)
Provide new members with a copy of your bicycle or pedestrian master plan, current work program, minutes of recent meetings, and a list of committee members, appropriate staff and politicians.

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- (4) **Training** – Training need not to be dull, difficult to organize, or expensive. Invite speakers to meetings, stage field trips, and send members to conferences (remember to budget adequate funds). Recent meetings in Orlando, for example, have featured a slide show on bicycle facility design and a workshop on ISTEA.
- (5) **Work Plan** – Encourage your committee to determine its priority projects once a year and review them every six months. This ensures energy and attention is focused on appropriate projects.
- (6) **Organize Meetings** – “Bring important issues to your committee,” advises Michael Ronkin, Oregon’s bicycle/pedestrian program manager. “Don’t let them get bogged down in details best dealt with by staff.” Schedule priority items first on the agenda. Ensure enough time is provided for their consideration. Try phrasing agenda items as questions, to encourage consideration before the meeting. For example, “Where should pedestrian crosswalks be established and why?” is better than Pedestrian Crosswalk Program.
- (7) **Committee Structure** – Subcommittees are recommended to manage specific projects. Establishing too many subcommittees, however, dissipates volunteer energies and becomes difficult to manage.
- (8) **Committee Credibility** – A committee’s credibility is often undermined because members fail to understand (or accept) its purpose and reporting relationships. Most committees are not responsible for bicycle or pedestrian programs. They are *advisory* bodies, providing vision and feedback to staff and politicians. Clarification of the committee’s specific role and responsibilities can avoid confusion and conflict.
- (9) **Annual Retreat** – Retreats serve several purposes: to review past activities, prepare a work plan, and address problems (e.g. uncooperative agencies) in a different environment.

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(10) **Recognition** – Never forget committee members are VOLUNTEERS. Show your appreciation! Send personalized letters of thanks. Stage a banquet at your agency's expense. Such gestures go a long way to harmonized staff/member relationships, ensure continued member involvement, and improve morale.

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