

NEW YORK BICYCLING COALITION
IMPROVING BICYCLING AND PEDESTRIAN SAFETY

chapter

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This manual supplies strategies for transportation professionals and advocates to work more effectively together.

HOW TO USE THIS MANUAL

This manual debunks common myths about advocacy and engineering that impede progress toward making communities safer for walking and bicycling. For example, when advocates believe transportation engineering terms and principles are too complicated for them to understand, it constrains their ability to provide valuable input on design and policies. Similarly, when transportation professionals see advocates as purely emotional people who complicate their work, they miss out on a wealth of information and experience that may be used to improve transportation infrastructure. This manual supplies strategies for transportation professionals and advocates to work more effectively together.

We begin with an introduction to terms commonly used to talk about bicycling and pedestrian facilities. Gradually, the manual incorporates principles that can guide the process of designing bikeable and walkable communities. Some readers may want to skip directly to Chapters 7 and 8, which offer and illustrate a straightforward methodology designed to help non-professionals gather information, in a form they can use to illustrate problems and work for change. Traffic professionals may also find the later chapters useful for understanding how advocates' perspectives can enhance political and engineering processes.

Advocates and transportation professionals have similar goals: to create and maintain a safe, user-friendly, multi-modal road system. Advocates are often aware of dangerous areas, and may use some combination of technical information and an understanding of state agencies to implement improvements. Many transportation professionals and government officials are already advocates for bicyclists and pedestrians, though many others could be better informed on these issues (but then again, who couldn't?).

In either case, advocates are better equipped to present solutions if they understand the technical basics of bicycling and pedestrian infrastructure and the institutional basics of government agencies responsible for it. Further, transportation officials are better equipped to initiate engineering solutions when they are provided with certain types of information, including the unique perspective of users, in ways they can understand and deploy.

Successful Strategies

The central premise of this manual is the advocate's basic goal is to put proposals on the appropriate agency's agenda (e.g. the Transportation Improvement Plan) and the advocate's basic means is by favorably influencing agency decisions. There are many more skills and strategies one may use to accomplish such goals than what is covered by this document (e.g., using the media, and other marketing skills). This manual focuses on developing skills that will lead to

more favorable interactions with transportation professionals.

As seasoned advocates will tell you, for maximum, long-lasting impact, the most important focus areas are policy, education, engineering, and enforcement. Opinion differs on which area is most important, but it is generally accepted that policy and engineering solutions are longer-term, while enforcement is highly variable and hard to institutionalize. Education is on-going. As Chapter 4 on traffic calming suggests, good engineering can be self-enforcing, reducing the need for external policing.

Many advocates start out as laypersons, unfamiliar with transportation policy and engineering, and quickly become proficient in areas calling for a high degree of expertise. But make no mistake! Specialized vocabulary and protocols, constant references to acronyms, technical terms, and particular policies can be extremely daunting. The thoughtful advocate will become familiar with crucial terms, striking a difficult balance between demystifying expert language and respecting the expert's experience and knowledge. This manual seeks to foster empathy and better working relationships between advocates and transportation officials by suggesting communication strategies that balance and respect the different perspectives.

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After the Proposal

The strength of this manual is it outlines—in broad strokes and specific strategies—steps leading up to a traffic engineering proposal. This is not, however, the whole story. Once designed, a proposal still must pass a series of hurdles before being built (“the ribbon cutting”). Agencies and transportation professionals further negotiate and change the proposal during design. Competing interests might try to put off the proposal for a few years, or table it altogether—not necessarily for any reason other than they have different priorities.

IMPLEMENTATION

The advocate has a continued role then, to be there to make sure the proposal follows the original goals. Instead of backing off after the proposal, follow-up to make sure it keeps moving ahead (with its original schedule, scope, and budget intact). Support the agency when it goes to defend the project against other ones. Keep the issue public, for example by placing stories in the media, to improve the project's chances for implementation.

MONITORING AND FEEDBACK

Even after the completion of a project, advocates and professionals face the task of determining how much the project succeeded in meeting the original goals (e.g., reducing the number/severity of accidents). Many transportation professionals become frustrated by

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Email us at
nybc@nybc.net

what they view as a naïve assumption by advocates: once implemented, a project causes all previous problems to magically disappear. Most solutions, they note, mitigate problems rather than halt them. By monitoring the situation, advocates can help agencies gather feedback both can use for proposing future projects and designs.

The point of this discussion is not to deter anyone from working to improve safety for bicyclists and pedestrians, but rather to highlight the place of the project proposal in the overall process. Responsible advocates can stay involved with projects through stages of design, implementation, monitoring, and feedback.

The value of different approaches

We offer these materials as a guide for improving safety, not as dogma intended to discourage or displace all other approaches. Be ready to improvise and compromise. Discuss your problem with other advocates who have done similar things and talk with transportation professionals. Our hope is this manual helps you become conversant, but we do not expect you to instantaneously become an expert. We want to encourage and support your work, and we understand this is neither easy, nor straightforward (neither people nor systems are necessarily rational). Our broader goal is to initiate a dialogue between the people best equipped to improve bicycling and pedestrian infrastructure.