

LESSONS FROM THE LAUNCH OF A SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORTATION EFFORT IN WINONA, MINNESOTA

JANUARY, 2007

**BY MARTHA GREENWALD
FOR SUSTAIN WINONA**



LESSONS FROM THE LAUNCH OF A SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORTATION EFFORT IN WINONA, MINNESOTA

CONTENTS

- I. INTRODUCTION, page two
- II. SUSTAINABLE MODES OF TRANSPORTATION, page four
- III. OUR STRATEGY, page six
- IV. PARTNERS, page seven
- V. TRANSPORTATION SURVEY, page ten
- VI. CONCLUSIONS, page eleven

I. INTRODUCTION

Last August, 2006, as gasoline prices surged, I decided to put into action an idea I had been interested in for 4 years: a concerted push to persuade my fellow citizens to use more sustainable modes of transportation. Sustain Winona, a grassroots, all-volunteer group focused on sustainability, endorsed the project effort. As project coordinator, I decided to pick the first week in October as Sustainable Transportation Week, a campaign period where we would put the spotlight on walking, bicycling, carpooling and taking the bus. The purpose of this report is to outline the challenges and lessons learned from trying to implement this project.

The City of Winona, population 26,587 (est. 2005), is located in southeastern Minnesota on the Mississippi River. The City is home to Winona State University, Saint Mary's University, businesses including Fastenal, Benchmark Electronics, and a number of other industries. It is a commercial, educational, manufacturing and shipping center located within an agricultural and limestone-quarrying region.

One of the first things we did was to approach the City of Winona to support the campaign. The City Manager had said he wanted the City to become more environmentally conscious, and he brought together a number of department heads to see how the city could help. He suggested we obtain a mayoral/city council proclamation establishing our week, which would attract press coverage to the project. The City Clerk agreed to put bus schedules on the front page of the City's website, to put up permanent bus schedule signage on the downtown bus kiosk, and to offer a ride-the-bus free day. The assistant city planner agreed to create a map of existing bicycle routes.

Our focus was on publicizing the event, through flyers, newspaper articles, website work (www.sustainwinona.org), and partnerships with local businesses and other groups. We selected the first week of October to carry out the event, because of the synergy offered by Robert Sweetgall's visit to town, sponsored by the Winona School District. Sweetgall (www.creativewalking.com) walked across America to improve his health, and has become a popular motivational speaker on the subject of walking, hired by groups that are interested in obesity prevention and health.

The project we conceived had a number of challenges. The first was what name to give the event. We had settled on Sustainable Transportation Week, but a telephone conversation with Action Media (www.actionmedia.org) consultant David Brooks caused us to rethink that idea. Brooks said most people don't understand what the word "sustainable" means, and suggested we pick a name that described what we wanted people to do. Quickly, the event was renamed "Try It! Transportation Options Week."

The next challenge was finding partners with passion or commitment to the vision of the project, which was described as follows:

A community with a multi-faceted transportation system that provides alternatives to driving alone. Reducing the number of vehicles on the road cuts vehicle emissions and noise, decreases congestion, extends the life cycle of existing roadways, promotes a healthier community, reduces need for parking lots, and saves money spent on fuel.

In order to find effective partners for the project, we had to find frames of meaning they would connect to. These were invariably different from my own motivational frames—which were centered around worries about global warming, peak oil, and a personal ethic of thrift, which made me passionate about carpooling. Although many people express concerns about global warming and peak oil, there still is a lot of uncertainty about these issues in many people's minds. Moreover, the negative effects of these trends will ripple out over decades, and it is difficult to capture attention and action without immediate urgency as an impetus.

The issue of transportation is complex and there is no single group, either public or private that seems inclined to look at it from a systemic basis. For example, the local Chamber of Commerce is very interested in transportation from an infrastructure development perspective, i.e. more roads, more bridges, better airports, etc. The Chamber does not have members clamoring for more carpooling or bicycling however. So creating partnerships with the business community was another challenge.

We were counting on rising fuel prices to create a teachable moment, spurring citizens to consider transportation options from an economic perspective. Unfortunately, fuel prices fell rapidly by \$.75 from August to October, alleviating some of the economic worries that had been more intense during the peak summer driving months.

A frame of meaning that ultimately connected with many people was health and obesity. Many different groups and individuals are worried about rising health care costs and the epidemic of obesity. Baby boomers are entering early retirement, and their preoccupation with health is causing some of them to get more physically active through walking and bicycling. Businesses are dealing with rising health care bills and see walking and bicycling programs as helping their bottom-line from the prevention perspective.

II. SUSTAINABLE MODES OF TRANSPORTATION

According to the St. Paul-based group, Transit for Livable Communities (TLC), as much as "30 percent of us cannot drive because we are too young, too old, or physically impaired."

Rates of bicycling and walking in Minnesota are very low, and have actually been decreasing. Bicycling and walking decrease traffic congestion, promote a more positive outlook, and make our neighborhoods safer. Health educators are extremely worried about rising obesity levels and other implications of our physical inactivity. TLC says:

We could easily walk or bike more: Half the trips we make are less than three miles, 40 percent are less than two miles, and 28 percent are less than one mile. Yet 75 percent of trips of less than one mile are made by car.

Walking

Winona has a number of assets as a walkable community. Much of the city, especially along the Mississippi River, is completely level. Most of this portion of the community has sidewalks. The presence of Winona State University in the center of the City has acculturated drivers to yield to pedestrians.

Suburban style neighborhoods in Winona largely lack sidewalks. Furthermore, the neighborhoods may lack pedestrian access to community service areas due to barriers such as topography, highway 61, and railroads.

Bicycling

Off-road bicycle paths surround Lake Winona, and shoulder-type bicycle paths connect Pelzer Street to Riverview Drive and Prairie Island Road. Bikes coexist with parked cars on east-west routes: 5th street from Mankato Avenue to Pelzer, and Sarnia Street/Gilmore Avenue from Mankato to Highway 14. I walked along 5th Street on a sunny October day recently and encountered a number of bicyclists, primarily senior citizens, using the sidewalks rather than the street. This seemed a rational decision given the amount of traffic on 5th Street.

Consultants to the City's Comprehensive Plan update, currently underway, have apparently suggested 7th street as a bicycle route, which has far less traffic. It is unclear whether bicyclists pay attention to officially established bike routes.

A City-County work group, staffed by the Winona County EDA and a representative of the DOT are currently working on developing a bicycle trail plan for the region. They hope this plan will help make the case at the Minnesota Legislature for more funding for bicycle trails. At the very least, bicycle advocates hope that a connected off-trail bicycle route can be constructed along the Mississippi River, and that funds can be found for bicycle access to the Winona Middle School. This trail would require agreements with

multiple property owners. If completed, this trail would start to make bicycling more viable as a transportation option in Winona.

Businesses could do much more to provide bicycle racks as amenities for customers and employers. The Hyvee shopping mall area lacks bicycle racks, and so does Fastenal, one of the largest employers in Winona. Many of the bicycle racks that do exist at local employers are in the back corners of buildings next to things like garbage dumpsters or machinery. If we hope to promote more bicycling, bicycle racks need to be a readily available amenity.

A group of young people, the Down N' Dirty bike club, is one of the most active proponents of bicycling in Winona. The club fixed up a number of discarded bikes and placed them in strategic spots in Winona for free bicycle use. A number of the bikes apparently ended up in the river. This is a good idea that might thrive more with official city sponsorship and collaboration in helping the community develop more positive norms about the use of these bikes.

Winona Transit

Winona's Transit program is funded in large part through federal government grants, with a municipal match. The approximate cost of running the transit system is \$400,000 per year. Winona Transit is managed by the Winona City Clerk, with day-to-day operations managed by a Winona taxi company. Winona buses run on four distinct routes, connecting various outlying locations to the downtown, including St. Mary's University, Winona Middle School and Winona Technical College, Menards and the Winona Clinic, the west end airport and industrial park. A single ride costs \$.75, while a monthly pass costs \$25.50. Bus drivers will deviate from their routes to deliver passengers to a nearby door for a small fee. Buses run from 6am to 6pm, Monday through Friday.

Most view the City Transit service as something that aims at serving the poor and elderly. Expanded bus usage will not be possible as long as people look at buses in this way. We need to find ways to change people's perceptions about who uses the bus. A way to start this effort is to make information about the bus service more widely available. Posting of schedules, rates, and route maps at the downtown kiosk would be a step in this direction. The downtown bus shelter/kiosk is the physical location that is most associated with the bus system. Downtown employees and shoppers could be introduced to the notion of riding the bus if they could view this information at the kiosk.

One possibility for expansion of the City bus service would be as subscription service for certain employers. For example, if an employer had a number of employees working on 3-11pm shifts, it could pursue a subscription service for these employees.

Carpooling

Carpooling is an idea that has an increasingly intuitive appeal, since it could flexibly serve a wide variety of transportation needs. With the exception of train and bus routes between major cities, most of Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa completely lack any kind of transportation service to take citizens from one community to another. The right kind of carpooling service could effectively meet these needs.

Commuters who come to Winona from outlying small towns could save money by finding individuals who drove the same route day after day. Individuals who are making one-time-only trips to airports, conferences, and other events in big cities could save substantially on costs, and wear-and-tear on the car. Internet ride matching software now exists, such as at www.erideshare.com, that allows riders and drivers to connect with one another based on agreed upon departure times and dates.

I have interviewed at least 20 people about their attitudes towards carpooling, and find considerable reluctance to try out carpooling. People who don't carpool appreciate the greater flexibility, speed, freedom, safety and convenience of driving alone. Promoters of carpooling around the world have found similar reluctance. Currently, rideshare boards are available at Bluff Country Co-op and at Winona State University. The boards do not receive a great deal of use.

Because of our on-going interest in carpooling, Sustain Winona plans to continue to search for literature sources or other types of research that may provide the keys to persuading drivers to more frequently consider carpooling. We will also be examining how lessons from the field of social marketing could make carpooling more viable for certain target groups. A recent survey completed by Sustain Winona's Students in Action group (see Transportation Survey, below), revealed that a substantial number of citizens will turn to carpooling if they had to reduce their car use. Motivations to carpool may be changed by the fluid world energy situation.

III. OUR STRATEGY

Try It! Transportation Options Week ran from October 4-11, 2006. The aim of the week was to disperse information on the transportation options to diverse audiences. The week featured a couple of promotional events and public relations materials. We had events and strategies organized around the different transportation modes.

- Friday, October 6th, was "Ride the Bus Free Day." All routes of the bus were free for the entire day.
- Saturday, October 7th, was "Bicycle to the Market Day." There was music at the downtown Farmer's Market, and two downtown grocery retailers offered drawings for free prizes.
- Tuesday, October 10th, highlighted the "Get Motivated to Walk Week." This featured a talk by Robert Sweetgall, the motivational speaker and expert on walking. The talk was offered at the Winona Middle School during the evening.
- "Be a Cooperative Carpooler" was the pitch for carpooling, directing readers to the Rideshare Board at Bluff Country Co-op and to the website, www.erideshare.com

The Mayor and City Council issued a proclamation supporting the transportation week. Reporters wrote advance articles about Try It week in the Winona Daily News, a daily paper, and in the Winona Post, a free newspaper that comes out twice a week. Winona Radio featured an interview on the subject. Several guest editorials came out in the newspapers in support of the project.

IV. PARTNERS

The entire project helped us learn about the perspectives and abilities of diverse publics to buy-in to the goals of the project. What follows is an assessment of the existing or potential partners for a project of this nature.

City Government

The City was an early sponsor of the project. Management of the City Transit Service is under the City Clerk. In the run-up to the Try It! Transportation Options Week, the City Clerk made sure the Transit Service was temporarily posted on the front page of the City's website. She also assisted in promoting the Ride-the-bus free day. In addition, an assistant city planner updated city-wide maps showing the location of bicycle routes, and assisted in brainstorming ideas about the campaign.

The City is likely receptive to future collaboration. It is in the midst of a comprehensive plan update that looks for solutions to transportation and other issues. A member of the City Planning staff is participating in a regional bicycle trails planning effort. Winona has few off-road bicycle routes, and sees the need for more. A referendum for a half-cent sales tax was recently defeated by the voters in a referendum. Some of these funds were to be used to expand bicycle trails.

Business Community

A local branch of the Society of Human Resource Managers (SHRM) provided a connection to the business community. SHRM sent a letter prepared by Sustain Winona requesting sponsorship of the Try It Week to all its members. This did not elicit much response. A more personalized follow-up effort is in the works.

A conversation with an HR person for a manufacturing business revealed that transportation was a recruiting issue. Several potential employees had asked the company to help arrange carpools, and when the employer failed to do so, turned down the job. The HR person was pleased to learn of the internet carpool matching site, www.erideshare.com, and felt it would be a useful resource in the future. This same individual expressed her desire for extended transit hours to serve employers who worked later shifts. She also agreed that more flexibility on the part of the company in regard to transportation matters (like more flexible start times) could reduce employee turnover, but felt this was not perceived as an important issue by her superiors.

At least one Winona business reportedly launched a bike-to-work campaign in the recent past, not connected to this event. Health and obesity prevention were cited as the motivations for this event. Winona has had somewhat successful bike-to-work campaigns in the past. I am not aware of any Winona businesses which offer benefits such as the Emergency Ride Home program, as an incentive to carpool, bike, or take the bus.

The Winona Chamber of Commerce has recently launched a “When Work Works” partnership, with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce/Alfred P Sloan Foundation. It is one of 24 cities around the country to join this partnership. The focus is on increasing business’ competitive advantage in part through workplace flexibility, “which encompasses a broad range of work arrangements in addition to better-known options such as part-time work, telecommuting and flex-time.” The Chamber recently invited Joyce Gioia, a national speaker on future business trends, to be the keynote speaker at a membership event. Gioia is author of a number of books that argue that greater workplace flexibility will give businesses a competitive edge with better, more committed employees. This project may create an opportunity to interest Chamber members in transportation flexibility.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has a program that recognizes the Best Workplaces for Commuters (BWC). More than 1900 businesses around the country participate in this program. Most of the participating Minnesota companies listed in the directory are based in the Twin Cities area, with the exception of Mayo Clinic in Rochester. Some of the best practices recognized by the EPA among employers are things like vanpool services, telecommuting arrangements, parking cash-out options, transit use subsidies, and emergency ride home programs. Winona businesses do not seem to be familiar with many of these programs. Therefore, the opportunity exists to introduce these businesses to programs that may be cost-effective for the business and employees.

Among the Winona retail businesses, Bluff Country Co-op committed to partner with the project from its inception. The environmental reasons for the project were readily appreciated by this group. The Co-op has a rideshare board posted by its back door. Few members are making use of this board, however. The Co-op also participated in the Bike to Market Campaign, along with the Winona Farmer’s Market, and the downtown Midtown Foods. Approximately 15 small free prizes were given away to customers at these locations after Bike to Market Day. There did not appear to be great public awareness of this event, despite publicity. More thought needs to go into aligning such promotions with the interests and needs of the businesses themselves. We especially need to find a constructive role for local bike shops, which would stand to gain from increased emphasis on bicycling.

Health organizations are also potential business partners for this project. Winona Health was a sponsor for the WAPS wellness program and should certainly see the benefits of sustainable transportation from the health perspective. This connection could be made more effectively in the future. Business could be a more committed partner to this project

from several perspectives. A challenge to the project organizers in the future is to find business partners who are willing to translate this interest into action.

Schools

The Winona Area Public Schools (WAPS) has a Wellness Committee, established in part, to comply with federal mandates to promote healthy eating and more physical activity. This year, WAPS initiated a “Step Up to Healthy Living” campaign that involves a variety of activities. Robert Sweetgall’s visit to the school to tout the benefits of walking was part of this campaign. We did not have time this first year to explore the possibilities for a city-wide student campaign for more walking, bicycling and carpooling. This topic is worth exploring if the Try It Campaign is repeated in 2007.

Discussions with St. Mary’s University and Winona State University were launched too late to get meaningful participation in this project. Both schools indicated they were receptive to collaborating in a more meaningful way in the future. Dr. Bruno Borsari assigned several students to explore how the WSU campus could be more sustainable from a transportation perspective. We hope to learn more about the students’ findings. WSU has a carpool board but it is apparently not heavily used.

WSU currently spends approximately \$174,000 a year on free buses that transport students between its separate campus areas. The manager of the service reports that the buses provide rides to between 10,000-13,000 students per week. The University is very interested in sustainable transit in order to alleviate demands for parking.

Winona County

The Winona County Board signed on as a sponsor for Sustain Winona’s sustainable transportation initiatives. The Department of Public Health spearheaded this interest. The Public Health Department’s interest in this topic comes from several perspectives:

1. The epidemic of obesity and its impact on public health. This interest includes both clients of the County and employees of the County.
2. Crisis planning: Public Health is charged with emergency planning. Pandemic flu and peak oil will be public health challenges.
3. County social service clients tend to be vulnerable people, poor or elderly, who have poor access to transportation.
4. Transit issues: Several county administrators have expressed frustration with the (presumably federal) guidelines that prevent the Winona Transit Service from going outside City of Winona boundaries. Poor and vulnerable people who live outside of the City of Winona have poor transit access. They may face severe difficulties in getting to medical appointments or to work.

The Winona County EDA has recently launched a bicycle trails planning process that involves a representative from the Minnesota Department of Transportation. The hope is that plans can be developed that will support greater financial investments from the Minnesota Legislature on bicycle trail development in Winona.

Sustain Winona and Winona County are active members of the Clean Energy Resource Teams (CERTS, www.cleanenergyresourceteams.org) Up until this time, CERTS has focused on primarily renewable energy. There is apparently an interest in transportation, but the best strategies for CERTS teams to pursue have not been identified.

Non-governmental groups

An attempt was made to promote Try It Week through churches in Winona. A number of churches should theoretically support this effort either from a stewardship perspective—which is the dominant theme in evangelical churches recent attention to global warming as a topic, or from a social justice perspective. One church inserted 400 Try It flyers in their church bulletins. One pastor promised to promote it from the pulpit. There is no way of gauging the effectiveness of our church contacts, although they undoubtedly contributed to some synergy around the event.

Media

Both the Winona Daily News and the Winona Post devoted front page space to articles, editorials, and press releases about the event. The coordinator was interviewed by a local radio station. Public service announcements were sent to local radio stations and public radio stations. Local cable television stations were not contacted but could be in the future.

V. TRANSPORTATION SURVEY

In September and October of 2006, Winona high school students conducted in-depth surveys of 142 Winona households, regarding attitudes towards energy conservation and transportation. The three transportation related questions that were asked in the survey, and the responses, are indicated below:

Please complete the following sentence, picking one phrase, that best reflects your sentiments:

9. *I would be motivated to conserve my own gasoline use if:*

- a. The price really started to seem high: 39%
- b. I knew that fuel emissions were contributing to global warming: 27%
- c. I could easily get to errands and work using the bus or bicycle: 21%
- d. My employer encouraged it more: <1%
- e. My faith community or friends were doing it more: 3%
- f. I felt I could lose weight by walking or bicycling more: 8.5%

10. *What prevents you from using the bicycle more for transportation?*

- a. There is poor bike access from my neighborhood to where I need to go: 9%
- b. My employer doesn't encourage/accommodate bike use: 4%
- c. I am worried about bicycle safety on Winona streets: 17%
- d. I am not physically fit for bicycle use: 16%

- e. The bicycle is not flexible enough for all the places I need to go: 49%

11. If you had to reduce your car use, which solution would you explore FIRST?

Pick only one!!!

- a. Carpooling: 37%
- b. Taking the bus: 23%
- c. Bicycling or walking: 32%
- d. Telecommuting: 7%
- e. Other (_____): <1%

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Sustain Winona learned much about the complexity of this topic and the perspectives of the diverse potential partners. We learned that the reasons that people will try alternatives to the single occupancy vehicle are diverse. These motivations will probably remain in flux based on events beyond our control. Health is probably a good unifying theme for future events: focus on the health of people and health of the planet. However, the survey indicates that rising gas prices and elevated awareness of global warming may begin to play a larger role in motivating people to conserve on gas consumption.

Transportation accounts for about 20% of all greenhouse gas emissions. In addition to concerns about global warming, a parallel discussion is occurring in energy circles over prospect of peak oil. Proponents of peak oil argue that petroleum is the fundamental linchpin of our present democratic society. As cheap oil/energy/gas quietly fades into history, lives around the world will change.

Sustainability is about building resilience. Resilience could be defined as the ability to persevere despite obstacles and uncertainty. Peak oil and global warming will test the resilience of people and communities. Winona, like every other community in North America, needs to build a resilient transportation system capable of functioning when gas prices increase, or when other shocks hit the system that force change.

Sustainable transportation is a concern for everyone. Leaders in government and business need to speak out about the disadvantages of our reliance on the single occupancy vehicle. Greater use of all the transportation options will help businesses and individuals save money, prevent obesity and therefore lower health care costs, reduce demand for parking structures, and lower air emissions.

Executing the Try It Week was inexpensive, even in light of the 2 months of full time effort donated to the project by the coordinator. It should be possible to increase citizen participation in walking, biking, carpooling and taking the bus without massive new governmental or private expenditures. The largest cost item would involve the future expansion of off-road bicycle trails.

The challenge for the future is to get potential partners to donate some time to developing a strategy that will raise the awareness and elicit the participation of larger numbers of people. We were unable to quantify the number of people who tried different transportation options, although we heard a number of stories about people participating. We were disappointed that more people did not ride the bus on the day it was free. The City of Winona has stated it will be upgrading the downtown transit kiosk in the Spring of 2007, an action that could raise the visibility of the kiosk in the downtown as a central travel site.

Questions for those who would support additional efforts toward creating a resilient and sustainable transportation system in Winona are:

1. Is there a better time of the year to execute a campaign? In other parts of the US, bicycle to work weeks are held in May. However, both Madison and LaCrosse Wisconsin had car-free campaigns that were launched in the fall.
2. How can citizen participation in the campaign be enhanced? We could learn from the examples of other communities who use trip logs, prizes, and other celebratory events.
3. How can governmental and business leaders be more actively involved in raising the awareness of employees and citizens about this topic?
4. Would the vision of this project be furthered more by one-on-one continued advocacy with project partners, rather than a time-limited campaign?
5. How could the project be made more effective by though partnerships with LaCrosse or other population areas that send workers to Winona?



.....

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sustain Winona expresses its appreciation to a variety of individuals who assisted in the development of this project. These included Sustain Winona members Anne Morse, Randy Schenkat, Kathy Geiger, Dave Derks, and Pat Bailey. City of Winona staff Eric Sorenson, Monica Mohan Hennessy, Joe Barbeau, and Deb Beckman provided invaluable assistance. Barb Thoman of Transit for Livable Communities provided connections to the larger world of sustainable transit. Other support and assistance came from Lynne Theurer, Winona County, Gaye Mortenson, WAPS, Daryl Ehrlick, Winona Daily News, Sara Elmquist, Winona Post, Bob Sebo, Winona Radio, Jean Meyer, DOT, Steve Nagel, City-County Trails group, Jeanne Hines, SHRM, Bruno Borsari, WSU, Liz Haywood, Bluff Country Co-op, and David Brooks, Action Media. We appreciate the civic involvement of Sustain Winona's Students in Action Group, consisting of students from Cotter and Winona High School, who executed the energy survey. We also appreciate support from the Winona Farmer's Market and Midtown Foods, Downtown.

For further information about this topic, please contact:

Martha Greenwald
1358 Skyline Drive
Winona, MN 55987
507-452-7168, imagine@hbc.com