

## **2 Walk and Cycle – where did that conference come from?**

Many of us will gather at the *2 Walk and Cycle* conference in Auckland next month. Readers may be interested in where it came from.

There have been cycling conferences longer than walking or combined walking and cycling conferences. This reflects a truism, which some may see as a problem. Cycling has a more iconic image than walking which, by contrast, is, well, rather too 'pedestrian'.

The first NZ cycling conference was down to the vision of one man – Hamilton engineer Paul Ryan (who was also involved in cycle advocacy). For about a year and a half, Paul pressed on as many professionals and local government people as would hear him, his idea for New Zealand to host what he called a cycling symposium. Paul had visited (and presented at) the 1996 Fremantle *VeloAustralis* conference, part of the (mainly European) international *VeloCity* series, and no doubt this fuelled his enthusiasm.

After assembling some support partners, convening a conference committee representing them, and nutting out ideas, the first conference, *Planning for and Promoting Cycling in Urban Areas*, was held at Waikato University in 1997. More presentations were accommodated than originally expected, but government agencies weren't involved, other than Michael Cummins of Land Transport Safety Authority presenting on government cyclist safety education and other initiatives. It was agreed that another conference in perhaps about two years' time would be a good idea – although how, where and who to achieve this was left open. The single day format made organising relatively simple – no accommodation and just some finger buffets to worry about.

Two years later, as I was considering applying for the IPENZ Transportation Group Study Award to do my *NZ Cycling Strategy Foundation Project*, Liz Yeaman of the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Authority (EECA) said she would organise a cycling conference if my application was successful (and sent a letter of support accordingly). Liz at EECA at the time was pioneering travel planning, travel demand management, and other innovations in the non-motorised transport area, since as yet this had not come under the ambit of the Ministry of Transport or any of the transport agencies (other than LTSA on road safety). At this news, several other players offered to help out on an organising committee. Christine Cheyne of Massey University offered a venue (Massey's Palmerston North campus), and the NZ Cycling Advocates' Network (CAN; now Cycle Action Network), formed in 1996, were also significantly involved, together with several local authorities. This was two days, in 2000 – significant expansion on Paul Ryan's symposium – and it was run on a shoestring. Accommodation was in student halls, the conference dinner was in the Students Union cafeteria, and it was deliberately held over a Friday and Saturday because many people, most notably cycling advocates, would be attending in their free time which might rule out weekdays.

The keynote presentation also practiced what EECA preached on energy usage. A conference call presentation by John Grimshaw (of Sustrans) and Mayer Hillman (of London's Policy Studies Institute) was given live from York, England. Grimshaw and Hillman both, on principle, turn down any speaking requests they receive which involves air travel (a

great many), on sustainability grounds. This very eco-friendly way of securing international speakers hasn't been repeated at the walking and cycling conferences.

Even at this time, the idea had been mooted and accepted that these conferences should be every two years. There was no formal 'owner', or even 'conference series', each conference being ad hoc and stand-alone, with an organising committee convened from volunteers. Generally, a local authority took the lead, and absorbed much of the cost. The Cycling Advocates' Network have always been involved. Government agencies became involved after the 1999 National-to-Labour change of government, and especially after the 2002 *Moving Forward* policy announcement (which also introduced the first National Land Transport Fund walking and cycling funding).

Every two years? The ever-proactive Christchurch City Council felt this was too long to wait and, after a huddle of Christchurch people at the 2000 Palmerston North conference, announced they would host a cycling conference the following year – which happened. After that, the cycling conferences settled down into their two-yearly cycle (no pun intended).

Living Streets Aotearoa, the walking advocacy organisation, was formed about this time and set up their own walking conferences. The first one was a single day in Wellington on 2004, tacked onto a major transportation conference (IPENZ's Transportation Conference collaborating with the NZ Institute of Highways Technology and some others), with proactive councillor (now mayor) Celia Wade-Brown taking the lead. After this, an arrangement was reached that walking conferences would alternate with the cycling conferences, so that one or other would take place every year.

Reena Kokotailo, first a walking advocate and then leading work on the Ministry of Transport's early 2000s *Getting There – On Foot, By Cycle* strategy, had strongly warned (first at the 2000 Massey conference) not to lump walking and cycling together in a combined strategy or conference, out of concern that their needs are very different from each other, and that walking would be swamped by the more iconic cycling (what she called the "joined at the hip" problem). At the Ministry, it was a major step forward to have any strategy on non-motorised modes, and to have two separate strategies was perhaps a step too far at this time. Eventually, this argument was lost for the conferences too, and the three-day *2 Walk and Cycle* conferences were born. The Friday-Saturday format, which had held since 2000, was replaced with Wednesday-Friday (still the case), perhaps reflecting the growth of attention from government people (who value their free weekend).

The demise of separate walking conferences probably had two causes. Firstly, it's a lot more work for people like official agencies who feel they need to be involved in planning for both modes. Secondly, and maybe more significant, bookings for the walking conferences fell markedly after the 2007 economic downturn (in these circumstances the training and conferences budget tends to be among the first to be cut).

Sometimes attempts have been made to carry branding onwards from one conference to another, but this didn't endure until the *2 Walk and Cycle* branding of recent years. From EECA's 2000 conference onwards, the amount of work involved came to be felt, a significant

burden if carried by volunteers or absorbed in an organisation's more general budget heads. In 2000, Liz Yeaman kept an assistant, Sheralee Macdonald, fully occupied for a considerable length of time on conference organising. Eventually, these conferences followed the practice of many other conferences of employing a professional conference organiser – the irrepressible Glenda Harding, familiar to many Roundabout readers from the IPENZ Transportation conferences.

The walking and cycling conferences have become bigger over the years (next month's programme is positively brimming) and have already spawned at least one other. After the 2000 conference, the Cycling Advocates' Network got together for an afternoon to plan their own strategies in a (nice pun) 'CAN Do'. For a while, the (annual) 'CAN Do's' were always one-day events (plus a bike ride or three!) attached to a cycling conference, in a year when there was one, and stand-alone over two days in a year without a conference, but they have expanded (including, for example, guest speakers). This year's CAN Do was held separately, put together by Hamilton's enthusiastic Claire Sherrington, and has effectively become a conference in its own right.

What of the future? Will *2 Walk and Cycle* proceed as it has done? Will it get bigger still, or give rise to other spin-off conferences? Will others set up rival conferences? I won't speculate, but one thing seems clear: these conferences have grown steadily in content, interest and experience since that first one in 1997. I think we can expect further growth, whatever form that may take.

Roger Boulter

*(a member of all cycling conference, and some walking conference, organising committees 1997-2007)*