

Dylan McDowell

Riding a Green Bike into a Greener Tomorrow

I would like to start with a story from my home town. The story focuses around one man, John Mare, whose ideas would revolutionize Green thinking in a very literal sense.

Mare is a short man in his late sixties. His wire-rimmed glasses perch below white tufts of eyebrows that match a graying beard and he always wears a smile open for conversation. Mare grew up in South Africa, went to college in the States, and has been a professor at multiple universities throughout his professional career as a Veterinarian. Now retired, he and his wife have spent their lives traveling, but have settled down in the small coastal town of Waldport, Oregon; population 2050. Waldport is a modest community with a struggling school system and many residents falling far below the poverty line.

It was in this environment that Mare had an idea. Throughout his life Mare has traveled a great deal and seems to always go into a new situation with the question of “What can I take back to my own community from this new experience?” This question helped him notice an intriguing community bicycle renting program in Amsterdam over 30 years ago, and one in Tucson, Arizona where he worked as a Professor at the University.

Since then, the South African has worked with the other foreign philanthropist Sentilia McKinley (who came to Waldport from the Pacific Kingdom of Tonga) to establish a similar program in Waldport. There was one major difference, however, in

the fact that Mare's program offered free bikes with no rental process or check-out system; just pure faith in the individual.

Bikes were initially acquired from garage sales and donations, and painted a bright green color to symbolize sustainability. Each bike is equipped with a rope and the famous slogan on the seat, "If tied, don't ride."

Every morning, Mare drives around in his matching green Honda Element in search of bikes throughout town. He collects the bikes over the course of a couple hours, and then returns them to the community center in town where there is a workshop operated by GED students in need of work. It is here that the bikes get inspected and then are placed outside for a new day. Over the course of the next 24 hours anybody can grab a bike and ride it around town, and when they're done they simply leave it around town. Assuming the bike isn't tied—as that signifies the rider will return momentarily—anybody else can take the bike from its new location and ride it to their heart's content. Repeat as necessary until the next morning when Mare goes around and collects the bikes again.

The question must be raised: how is this program successful? The answer is that Mare isn't relying on money or collateral to ensure the bikes are taken care of. Instead, he is relying on an even rarer resource that most people wouldn't dream of using: faith in the individual.

"An important thing I want people to realize, is these bikes are not Sentilia's or mine," Mare said, "They belong to all of us; they belong to the community."

The simple lesson here is that people protect what they are a part of, and with Mare's program the community was the project. The bikes were donated, students did the repairs and painted the bikes, and everybody helped however they could.

It is time that we ride this idea into the 21st century. Portland is trying, but is hitting the brakes because of obstacles such as the installation of bike kiosks. There is a deeper problem here—and everywhere green initiatives are rising—and that is that Portland is trying to build the program *for* the community and not *from* the community.

I have heard it said that foreign countries look onto the U.S. and discuss the existence of a population dubbed “They.” A separation has developed between the common man and the legislator or the scientist to the extent that we comment that “they” raised gas prices or “they” created a new drug. It is time that we take ownership of our country and change “they” to “we.” It is time *we* think like Mare and implement ideas not to glorify ourselves with the intent of helping others, but with the help of others with the intent of glorifying our community.

I encourage all of us to go forward and ride a Green Bike into tomorrow in the hopes that we can take Mare’s message and apply it throughout the U.S. towards a more sustainable America.