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Car-Free Days in Jakarta? Don't Hold Your Breath

By Tracy Duvall

PHOTO: TONY DUVALL

The residents of Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia, love to ride their bicycles. Tens of thousands of cyclists throng Jalan Sudirman, Jakarta's main boulevard. Many of them smile and chat with other riders. As signs around the capital city exhort, these Indonesians "go green."

But this occurs only on Sunday mornings, when the city government sponsors Car Free Days.

Come Monday, the same people "go brown," most of them joining the millions who drive to work, school, or shopping in heavily polluting cars, motorcycles, or buses. Even during the morning rush, fewer than fifty cyclists pedal down Jalan Sudirman each hour. The result? Cars and motorbikes choke the roads, and people gag on the emissions. Respiratory illness is one of Jakarta's main health threats, and a haze conceals the high volcanic mountains a few miles to the south.

This is the conundrum that proponents of cycling, such as the local advocacy group Bike2Work Indonesia, face in this megalopolis of more than 28 million people. Despite widespread ownership and enjoyment of bicycles and a history of commuting by bike,

ADVOCACY BRIEFS *BY ANDREA CONNELL*

Brief-1

Organizations awarded "Better Bicycling Community" grants

Performance Bicycle, the country's largest cycling retailer, distributed $30,000 between 10 community organizations for their efforts to make cycling more accessible. "It was a tough decision to narrow it down to 10 recipients," said Performance Bicycle Chief Executive Officer David Pruitt. Projects the grants will fund include rejuvenating mountain bike trails, improving shared-use paths, cycling education, and promotion of cycling and walking in general. Each of the following organizations were awarded $3,000: Bike Austin, Bike Maryland, Bike Utah, Carrboro Bicycle Coalition, Cascade Bicycle Club Education Foundation, Central Ohio Mountain Biking Organization, Community Bikes, East Bay Bicycle Coalition, Living Streets Alliance, and Santa Monica Spoke.

today few Jakartans use them for transportation. Efforts to promote cycling in order to reduce pollution have boosted recreation but have had a miniscule effect on emissions. To most, commuting by bike still seems too hard.

For many residents of Jakarta, breathing is hard, too. Respiratory illness is perhaps the leading cause of serious illness, accounting for 63 percent of all medical visits in north Jakarta. Residents commonly wear masks to filter out airborne particles. And most of this pollution—about 70 percent—comes from transportation.

Starting in the 1970s and exploding over the last decade, car and motorcycle ownership has skyrocketed, resulting in traffic jams of legendary size. More than thirteen million cars and motorcycles clog the streets and, often, the sidewalks.

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These millions of private vehicles emit much more pollution than their equivalents in Europe and the United States. Indonesian law requires that new vehicles meet the Euro 2 standard, established in Europe in 1996. Europe's current minimum standard is Euro 5. Thus Indonesia does not regulate many of the pollutants that Western countries limit, and it tolerates much higher levels of others, such as carbon monoxide.

Buses are the most popular and economical alternative. Unfortunately, they also add to Jakarta's air pollution. Decrepit vehicles belch out massive clouds of fumes as they lurch across the city. But, because they are affordable to the 50 percent of Indonesians subsisting on less than $2 a day, at peak times passengers literally have to squeeze in.

Jakarta does provide low-emissions public transportation. Electric trains and the TransJakarta Busway—buses powered by natural gas and running in dedicated lanes—provide relatively affordable and quick transportation. But both face an oversupply of passengers.

All this should make cycling especially attractive. The overcrowding and chaos mean that traffic in Jakarta moves slowly: an average of eight miles per hour. This is not much faster than an eco-friendly bicycle.

Yet commuting cyclists are few. In a ten-minute period during rush hour, more than 1,200 motorcycles, 60 taxis, 40 buses, and quite a few private cars pass along the two slow lanes of Jalan Sudirman. On average, only three cyclists join them.

This paucity of cycling commuters, repeated throughout the city, remains mysterious. Indeed, many influences would seem to encourage cycling's popularity.

After all, Indonesia was colonized by the Dutch, who have made cycling an aspect of their national identity. Commuting by bike gained prestige among Jakartans in the early to mid-twentieth century, as Indone-

PHOTO: TONY DUVALL

sian civil servants pedaled to work. Cities taxed and licensed bikes and provided dedicated lanes. Indonesia's first president, Sukarno, famously rode bicycles for pleasure, and today some Jakartans believe that he rode incognito among the masses to understand their needs. The *becak*, or bicycle taxi, was ubiquitous.

In the 1970s this changed. Greater political stability encouraged economic growth, and increasing numbers of Jakartans bought cars and motorcycles. The city outlawed and destroyed the becaks as a hindrance to cars and an embarrassing symbol of backwardness. And cycling to work—or using a bicycle as a place of work among vendors—became associated with poverty.

In contrast, cycling for recreation has increased in popularity and prestige. Mass rides, or "fun bikes," occur almost every weekend in Jakarta as part of a celebration, fundraising effort, or marketing campaign. Mayors, governors, and even the president have joined them. At least one television show is dedicated purely to trail riding. And youths gather at night to perform tricks with expensive, fixed-gear bicycles. Indeed, Car Free Days have grown so popular that Jakarta's governor, running for reelection, has changed them from biweekly to weekly, in the name of reducing air pollution. (These events arguably only *appear* to reduce pollution, as drivers merely take alternate routes, diverting their vehicles away from Jakarta's sole pollution-monitoring station.)

The result is that many Jakartans have bicycles. However, most regard their bikes' purpose as entertainment and exercise rather than transportation. For example, Iwan, a 40-year-old lawyer, rode with a group of classmates from high school every Sunday—and only on Sunday. His motivation? "Having friends."

Bike2Work Indonesia would like to change this pattern. Exceeding the government's many signs ordering Jakartans to "Go Green," Bike2Work's (bewildering) slogan is to "Go Beyond Green." With cooperation and encouragement from government agencies, since 2004 this group has organized mass rides and classes in first aid and bicycle repair. Their high visibility also provides a model. As the group's leader, Toto Sugito, stated, "The way we campaign is to prove it [demonstrate] to people that there are many benefits of using a bicycle."

MOST JAKARTANS REGARD THEIR BIKES' PURPOSE AS ENTERTAINMENT AND EXERCISE RATHER THAN TRANSPORTATION.

Despite this encouragement, participants at Car Free Day say that for them to try commuting, the infrastructure must be improved. They especially want bicycle paths. Given the density and unruliness of motorized vehicles, cyclists fear injury. Currently, Jakarta has only one, short bicycle lane along a rarely used route, and parked cars and traffic commonly obstruct it. Bicycle parking exists at a few businesses, but determining these locations presents a challenge. Finally, cyclists say that they want showers, to avoid arriving at work sweaty.

Ironically, cyclists do not mention air pollution as a hindrance to commuting. Indeed, they and other Jakartans identify cycling as "healthier," even along the busiest thoroughfares. Sitting on the

Brief-2

League of American Bicyclists introduces higher standards

In late September, the League announced it was adding a diamond designation to its Bicycle Friendly Communities program, which recognizes efforts to improve cycling within cities. "If it sounds like we are moving the goalposts, it's because we are," said Andy Clarke, League President. "Communities are doing so much more, and the state of the practice in innovative infrastructure and programs has developed so rapidly in recent years, that it really is time to challenge communities to do even more to make biking better." The diamond designation will encourage American cities to compete with their European counterparts. Diamond status will tailor criteria to each city and will create 5-, 10- and 15-year goals.

sidewalk as a recent Car Free Day wound down, Eko—perhaps fifty years old—explained that he began cycling a few years ago to preserve his health. "A bicycle costs less than the hospital." But still he does not cycle for transportation.

No doubt cyclists deserve better infrastructure. But it is difficult to believe that the "build it, and they will come" model is sufficient to jumpstart bicycle commuting in Jakarta. The University of Indonesia provides free bikes for students and faculty to borrow, extensive and shady bike paths, and facilities for washing. Yet few students cycle around campus. Indeed, the parking lot of the architectural firm that the leader of Bike2Work co-owns is filled with cars and motorcycles—only he and one other employee cycle to work.

Why is this? My own research in Jakarta and the experience of cycling proponents elsewhere suggest that social engineering must accompany the physical engineering. Certainly the competition knows this. Manufacturers of cars and motorcycles don't simply demand more roads and parking spaces. They spend gobs of money on advertising to reinforce Indonesians' sense that motorized vehicles provide comfort, fun, and prestige.

Perhaps groups like Bike2Work should also apply principles from the marketing industry. The British government created a six-year program, Cycling Demonstration Towns, which funded pro-cycling campaigns in different places and compared their results. The final report found that marketing should be "integral to any cycling infrastructure scheme" and that efforts to promote biking should address those people who are most likely to adopt cycling as transportation.

Jakarta seems to have quite a few residents in this category—they already own bikes, enjoy riding them, and even pedal long distances through traffic to get to the Car Free Day site. And sometimes their rationales for not biking seem easy to overcome. For example, a young environmental activist told me that her friends dislike biking to work because it's difficult to carry things. So how can activists motivate these individuals to declare every day "car-free"?

More of the same isn't working—but is still happening—in Jakarta. Cycling pioneers there assume that whatever motivated them will, eventually, motivate others. So they continue the same activities—fun bikes, Car Free Days, carbon calculators—in the hope that these programs soon will serve as gateways to convert masses of Indonesians into bicycle commuters. Their efforts to improve Indonesia and the world are laudable, even heroic. But unfortunately, they seem decreasingly effective at motivating other cyclists to even try commuting by bike.

Unfortunately, as Toto Sugito said, "It's not as easy as we planned."

PHOTO: TONY DUVALL