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### Community Leaders Looking Forward to PeopleForBikes 2015 Tours

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By Jay Walljasper

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PeopleForBikes tours give insight into how strong bicycling systems can improve mobility, quality of life the economy.

gine a major city where 35 percent of all traffic is people on bikes. Or think even bigger—an entire nation re 27 percent of all trips are pedal-powered.

is not some Utopia dreamed up by a 24-year-old after too many handcrafted beers. These are real places ed in modern societies with high levels of car ownership. Places not so different from the US named enhagen and the Netherlands.

t believe it? Go there, and you can see for yourself. You'll be surprised to find these are great places for yone, no matter how they get around, because cities that work for bicyclists are more vital, prosperous, convenient and attractive places to live and work.

It's never been easier for local leaders across the US to experience life in these world-class communities. Next summer PeopleForBikes, a Colorado-based non-profit, is organizing tours of Denmark and the Netherlands to offer public officials, planners, civic activists and business leaders practical lessons about how to help their own cities thrive. (Minimum of four participants from each community.)

"These tours are 20 percent about bikes and 80 percent about how to make great places full of economic, social and cultural wealth," said PeopleForBikes' Zach Vanderkooij in a phone conversation from Amsterdam, where he was leading a group of officials from Atlanta, Seattle and Boston.

"Nothing is better than getting on a bike to see how it feels," said Rick Dimino, CEO of the Boston business coalition A Better City, who was part of the recent Netherlands tour. "We saw some very creative and robust ways that a strong bicycling system can improve mobility, quality of life and our economy in the US."

"I took hundreds of pictures on those trips and I gave many slideshows for our planners and transportation people to show what could be done," remembers Gabe Klein, former Director of the Chicago Department of Transportation, who visited Danish and Dutch cities on PeopleForBikes study tours.

Chicago, never noted previously as a great place to bicycle, is now ranked as America's #2 Bike City by *Bicycling* magazine. That's because the city is now [second only to New York](#) (*Bicycling's* #1 city) in the number of protected bike lanes—bike routes on busy streets that are physically separated from fast-moving

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vehicles. According to Vanderkooy, “protected lanes together with slow-speed local streets and off-street paths create a seamless transportation system that strengthens public transit and helps keep all traffic well-organized and free-flowing.”

Since 2009, more than 275 leaders from American communities coast-to-coast have enjoyed up-close and personal experiences with world-class transportation infrastructure and public spaces on PeopleForBikes study tours, including current or future transportation directors in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle and Chicago as well as the Transportation Manager for Facebook.

Up to this point, the tours have been by-invitation only, but applications are now being accepted for next summer’s expanded PeopleForBikes World Class Cities 2015. With only 100 spots available on eight tours, candidates are encouraged to [apply as soon as possible](#) to be part of “this five-day rolling conversation about transforming US streets”.

Brian Payne, President of the Central Indiana Community Foundation and a participant in a recent study tour to Denmark and Sweden, has already snapped up 12 spots for a delegation from Indianapolis. “We’re planning to bring neighborhood leaders, traffic engineers, city council members and public works employees,” Payne says, “because these trips change how people think about and experience a city, especially when they can all share moments of inspiration.”

“It’s a serious trip,” Payne adds. “You get up early in the morning and go all day and then go out to dinner to talk over everything you’ve learned. But you’re studying what makes a city livable and great, and that’s a lot of fun.”

Alumni of the tours enthuse about discovering great ideas that can be applied back home, not only European examples but also what they learn from peers in other American cities. “We’ll be taking a trip to Indianapolis,” explains Tami Door, CEO of the Downtown Denver Partnership who was on the same tour as Payne. “We want to see what they’re doing there.”

Indianapolis, a city that until now was more famous for car racing than bike riding, has become one of America’s leaders in protected bike lanes. Payne’s foundation launched a campaign to create the Cultural Trail, a bike and pedestrian route separated from traffic that winds for eight miles through the center of the city. A [study](#) from Indiana University’s Center for Urban Policy and the Environment calculates that the Cultural Trail’s impact on residential and commercial development and tourism will add \$863 million dollars and 11,000 jobs to the local economy.

Vanderkooy stresses that the point of these study tours is not for local US leaders to simply copy what they see in Denmark or the Netherlands, but to stimulate their creativity to find the best ways to promote social and economic vitality in their own communities. He explains that the workshops, seminars and firsthand experience on the streets help them “figure out how to do it faster—and better—in America.”

“Having a mix of people from across disciplines on the tours is very valuable,” counsels Seleta Reynolds, the new General Manager of the Los Angeles Department of Transportation, who visited Denmark in 2012 when she was working in San Francisco. “We brought some people from the financial side and some from the technical side, which made it easier to start making changes as soon as we got home.”

Three weeks after they returned home from the Netherlands, a delegation from Madison, Wisconsin was laying the groundwork for protected bike lanes. Chicago Alderwoman Pat Dowell quickly [settled a controversy](#) about bike lanes in her South Side ward and helped expand bike education programs for youth after seeing what’s possible in Denmark. Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto toured Danish cities and Malmö, Sweden, with PeopleForBikes in late June—and by early September, with help from the local business community, the city had built three new protected bike lanes.

For Denver City Councilman Albus Brooks, who toured Denmark in June, the transformation was personal as well as professional. “I once had been skeptical of bike lanes, and by the time I went to Copenhagen I was a supporter. Now I am fierce advocate.”

“I got a new bike—my first serious adult bike—and rode 100 miles the first week I was home, even in my suit,” he boasts. “A friend who knows me really well said that when I’m on a bike I just look happier. I’ve got my whole family biking more now—it’s healthy for everyone.”

Brooks is helping lead the push for major bike improvements in Denver. “Anytime we re-do streets we’re going to think about protected bike lanes, bike boulevards and wider sidewalks—the whole complete streets idea.”

And he’s planning a bike event for community people in his diverse downtown district. “I came back excited about how to make biking more multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-age.”

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*Jay Walljasper was an editor at Utne Reader from 1984 to 2004, serving as executive editor, editor and editorial director. He is author of [The Great Neighborhood Book](#) and [All That We Share: A Field Guide to the Commons](#) and editor of [Commons magazine](#). He writes, speaks and consults for a variety of organizations about creating strong, vital communities. Read more on [his website](#).*

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