

VIEWPOINT

It's Time to Go Dutch

WAS RECENTLY ASKED to travel to the Netherlands with a group of college students, professors, and practitioners as a subject matter expert on multimodal transportation. They were looking to tour the country by bike to better understand how its transportation network permeates different aspects of life, as well as draw parallels between our experiences abroad versus what we typically see stateside. I was charged with keeping the group safe as we biked 225 miles (no pressure), facilitating discussions about what we were experiencing, and collecting ideas we could apply to infrastructure in the U.S.

Going in, I was aware of the country's reputation, but I still wasn't prepared for how incredibly bike-centric it is. Whether traveling city streets or through the countryside, people on bikes are everywhere. It made for a perspective-shifting trip, and I brought back three lessons that can help American planners better understand how to reimagine our transportation and create multimodal systems with safer, more pleasant user experiences.

First, we have to start somewhere. The Netherlands wasn't always a bike utopia. In 1950, the country saw about 1,000 traffic deaths, and those numbers continued to rise for more than two decades. The fatalities were directly related to a drastic increase in motor vehicle traffic in the late 1950s—the same kind of traffic we continue to see here in the states.

Traffic fatalities weren't acceptable to the Dutch, so the people pushed back against cars and reclaimed the public right-of-way. But this transformation didn't happen overnight; instead, it was the result of cities protesting during the *Stop de Kindermoord* (Stop the Child Murder) campaign in the 1970s, which highlighted how fast cars in urban environments were costing children their lives. This movement focused on advocating for the needs of multimodal users and working to preserve



'As an engineer who creates multimodal facilities, I've heard almost all the arguments against bicycle and pedestrian-friendly projects. It's time we stop making excuses.'

—MIKE SEWELL

people-scale land uses that support safe passage for everyone, something we desperately need to focus on in the U.S.

Second, it's important that we not only design inviting facilities, but that we also make them intuitive. On the rare occurrence that our group took a wrong turn in the Netherlands, we knew almost immediately. The Netherlands' multimodal facilities are designed to keep users on the correct routes by clearly marking the paths, providing ample signage, and making bike connections extremely direct. By creating intuitive spaces and eliminating bad decision points, residents and tourists alike can concentrate on enjoying the ride, not navigation.

And the third lesson? Focus on the people. In the Netherlands, most planning decisions that impact the public

realm are evaluated based on three factors: safety, comfort, and enjoyment. The culture is deeply rooted in preserving space in the right-of-way for people, and communities work hard to create a comfortable experience.

Thanks to the Netherlands' focus on the end user, our group's interactions with our surroundings allowed us to soak up our environment, discover new places, and become part of the fabric that makes the Netherlands unique, instead of jockeying for a safe position on the roadway, as I often do stateside.

As an engineer who creates multimodal facilities, I've heard almost all the arguments against bicycle and pedestrian-friendly projects. It's time we stop making excuses. Let's start making changes. Let's go Dutch.

Mike Sewell, PE, is Gresham Smith's active transportation service line leader. He has more than 20 years of experience in planning, designing, and implementing multimodal transportation projects. He is a daily bike commuter and proud advocate for bicyclists and pedestrians. He coauthored the National Cooperative Highway Research Program 880 multimodal design guidelines and has testified to Congress on the importance of better funding for multimodal projects.

Viewpoint is Planning's op-ed column. The views expressed here are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the magazine or the American Planning Association. Please send column ideas to Lindsay R. Nieman, Planning's associate editor, at lnieman@planning.org.