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Portland 'bike queen' finds worldwide niche

Dallas, others seek to mimic Portland's biking successes

BY JENNIFER ANDERSON

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They call her the “bike queen,” and it’s no surprise why.

Mia Birk, the 41-year-old former bike program coordinator for the city of Portland, is doing what some might have deemed impossible.

After shaping much of Portland’s bicycling landscape in the 1990s, she’s now helping transform the billionaire-dwelling, car-loving city of Dallas, Texas – yes, the one that topped *Bicycling* magazine’s “Worst Cities for Cycling” last year – into a bicycling haven.

“Dallas certainly is not very bike-friendly now,” says Eric van Steenburg, executive director of the Friends of Katy Trail group, a nonprofit that promotes the paved 3.5-mile pedestrian and bike trail that winds through Dallas.

But after he attended a conference in Portland in August 2007 and spent some time downtown one evening, he saw the potential for his own city.

“It was 10:30 at night on a Thursday, and it was very lively,” van Steenburg recalls. “The light rail came through. There was a woman next to me with a bike. The train opened up, and she went in to hang her bike on the rack, but all four of them were already used.

“All these things blow people’s minds down here,” he says. “I want to make that happen for Dallas.”

A month later, after gaining tens of thousands of dollars in funding from a wealthy developer, van Steenburg knew who to hire for help.

He looked to Birk and her pedal-powered cohorts at her Southeast Portland firm, Alta Planning and Design, and they quickly got to work. They’re helping expand the Dallas trail system and planning for bike-friendly amenities throughout the city – like lights and public art. They’re designing separated sidewalk lanes called “cycle tracks,” which will crisscross the city, rather than conventional bike lanes.



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Mia Birk, Portland's former bike coordinator, now is a consultant advising Dallas, Texas, on how to make its streets more pedestrian- and bike-friendly.

“We’re typically hired by communities that want to make their communities’ lives better,” Birk says. “We usually have some level of community dissent. In Dallas, every single person has been nodding their heads, saying, ‘What can I do to help?’”

Dallas – which coincidentally is Birk’s hometown – is just one of dozens of cities around the globe, big and small, that are lusting after Portland’s world-renowned status and seeking out Birk’s expertise to help beef up – or create – their biking infrastructure.

The Alta firm, which she cofounded in 1999, consults with cities across Oregon and Washington as well as farther away: Columbia, Mo.; Raleigh-Durham, N.C., Kansas City; plus cities in Mexico, Canada, Dubai and Qatar, to name a few.

Consulting is only part of Birk’s busy life. She’s writing a memoir of her career and personal experiences, teaching a class at Portland State University’s Nohad A. Toulon School of Urban Studies and Planning, being a mother to a 10-year-old and 6-year-old, and sitting on the boards of Cycle Oregon and the Community Cycling Center.

She’s also the volunteer co-chairwoman of the steering committee that’s rewriting the city’s Bicycle Master Plan, a process that’s under way with the Portland Bureau of Transportation, and that’s expected to be completed in September.

There, Birk is working with Catherine Ciarlo, Mayor Sam Adams’ transportation director and a personal friend for the past 10 years. Ciarlo calls Birk a tireless go-getter who’s driven by her passion for sustainability.

“There are some people who love bikes,” Ciarlo says. “What she loves is what bicycling does for a city. She loves the impact that accommodating bicycles has on a neighborhood, a city and the way people live in it.”

Birk’s rise to bike superstardom didn’t come overnight. It started while she pursued her master’s studies at Johns Hopkins University’s Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, D.C., where she tried to drive her car but never could find parking.

“My brother gave me his old Schwinn and said, ‘Here, try this,’” she says.

Soon she was hooked. “It woke me up,” she says. “It felt good.”

Birk is telling much of her personal and professional journey in a book she hopes to publish in the fall. The working title is “Joyride: One Woman’s Journey to Empower People and Transform Communities.”

Rob Burchfield, the city’s chief traffic engineer, remembers hiring Birk as the city’s bike coordinator in 1993, when biking was seen as an alternative activity, rather than a regular mode of transportation.

“It was a time we needed change and the program truly was a little moribund,” Burchfield recalls. “Activists went to (then-City Commissioner Earl Blumenauer) and said we’d like you to pump life into this and make this more dynamic. I hired her to provide that program leadership.”

Her work in Portland included developing the city's first bike master plan and expanding the system to include colored bike lanes and bike signals. Many of the ideas came from an 18-city tour across the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, France and Switzerland, funded by a fellowship she received.

Birk also did outreach locally, trying to convince people to bike to the store, work, school, whatever they could manage. "I remember going out to East Portland, Southwest – Lions Clubs, PTA meetings – and people would just look at me like I was a freak," Birk recalls. "But three or four people would come up to me afterward and say, 'I'd like to bike.' That's the 10 percent we have now that are biking."

In 1999, the city all but defunded Birk's program, as Blumenauer left for Congress and other political support for biking was waning. So Birk left, had her first child, and, from a nook in her home, cofounded Alta. Last September, nearly a decade later, Alta bought office space for its 30 Portland employees in a historic building on Southeast Grand Avenue.

Nationwide, there are 60 employees in seven offices, most recently Las Vegas, which opened last month. Many of her Portland hires have been plucked right out of the classroom at PSU, where she has taught a course for five years on bike and pedestrian issues in urban planning.

Despite the recession, Birk knows that demand for her business will get even hotter. "You can reduce carbon emissions 19 tons per year for every mile of pathway we implement," she rattles off, practiced from so many public lectures. "That's the same as planting 100 trees or not driving an SUV 2,000 miles in a month."

Scott Bricker, executive director of the nonprofit Bicycle Transportation Alliance, has known and admired Birk's dedication and energy as he's pedaled alongside her for years. What seems to keep her going, he says, is the way she blends her work with her passion.

"I've co-led bike tours with her around Portland for visiting guests, and we often stop at her house, which is on a bike boulevard," he says. "We'd socialize, drink lemonade, just play around. And when we're in very important meetings, there's always an opportunity to realize what we're doing is what we love."

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