

cycling + remodeling

strange bedfellows?

A story about viral infiltration

By Rick Dubrow

THERE'S A SYNDROME IN THE remodeling industry called remodeling fever. It refers to a client's typical reaction to watching their home get torn apart by a bunch of near strangers who practically live with them for the duration. The drywall dust gravitates throughout; numerous trucks clog their driveway; a window gets mistakenly left open overnight. The list can prove viral to the home's inhabitants. Tempers elevate; fevers rise.

There's another unrelated virus – bicycling – that is infiltrating our remodeling company, A-1 Builders. Unlike remodeling fever, we're hopeful that this particular virus does gravitate throughout.

This story is about the union of the two viruses, cycling and remodeling – seemingly strange bedfellows. It all started when our client, Ellen Barton, asked A-1 Builders if we would use bicycles for the transportation aspects of her remodeling project. This made sense, given her world view. For three years she's been the program manager for the Whatcom Council of Governments' everybodyBIKE (everybodybike.com), the bicycle education program for Whatcom Smart Trips (whatcomSmartTrips.org). Whatcom Smart Trips is an ongoing partnership between local government, public agencies, employers, and schools to promote transportation by walking, bicycling, sharing rides, and riding the bus.

Barton already knew I was infected by the cycling virus since I had

taken a number of everybodyBIKE's classes. I'm an all-weather cycling commuter (except for snow and ice), and this past summer I rode in two classic rides in Washington State – Cascade Bicycle Club's Seattle to Portland ride, as well as Ride Seattle to Vancouver Then Party.

Barton's challenge to my company was an opportunity to infect my co-workers!

Her project was to repair the faulty siding and deck connection performed about eight years ago by another local contractor. This was not a large project – it took us three weeks – but a critical repair given her home's exposure to Bellingham Bay's southwest, wind-driven rains. Located on a bluff above the Nooksack River's broad delta, the home is near a difficult cycling road: one lane in each direction; no bike lanes, not even shoulders to speak of; a 40 mph speed limit; a road notorious for alcohol-infused drivers; just past a terribly dangerous two-lane bridge along a blind, sweeping curve in the

road; and complete with concrete curbs and steel guardrails instead of shoulders!

I selected our two carpenters of choice for the project — Chris Pasquini, 37-years-old and the Project Manager, and Adam Yost, 28 and Pasquini's Support Carpenter. They were game for the challenge, with some caveats:

1. Their cycling equipment was marginal and in need of some lighting, visible vests and warmer gloves.
2. Given the home's location, they needed a tune-up on their skill set.
3. They didn't want their longer commute times to cost them any income.
4. Nor did they want their trucks to live on site during the project, given their exposure to possible vandalism. So their trucks couldn't act as their tool boxes as they normally do.

I committed to help them over these speed bumps.



Carpenters Chris Pasquini (left) and Adam Yost agreed to travel to and from the job site by bicycle.

Project Logistics

Just what aspects of the project were bicycles appropriate for? It's one thing to get our carpenters there, but another to move equipment, materials and debris. And what about the inspector Barton hired to create the scope of work, as well as inspect our progress along the way? She wanted

- weather (he took the bus instead, supporting our goal of using alternative transportation!).
2. When I called Leon Costanten, the inspector, I asked him whether he'd be game for this challenge. His response was instantaneous. "You'll have to find another inspector!" Since he was already an

lockers for the crew's tools which would ordinarily be stored in their pickups. He used 30 minutes to prepare and place these two lockers on site, time which wouldn't have been necessary if we had used their trucks as tool boxes. And no additional vehicle trip was necessary to place these tool lockers.



Our first experiment: We asked our entire team to saddle up and haul our debris box to Ellen's house. Just kidding! But it was a blast taking this photo!

an inspector's input and oversight into the repair work because the first attempt had already failed! Would the inspector be willing to bike there?

Our first experiment was asking our entire team to saddle up and haul our debris box to Ellen's house. (just kidding!) But it sure was a blast taking the photo! We settled for the following scenario:

1. Pasquini and Yost would cycle as often as possible getting to and from the site. Ultimately this became every single day except for the first day when they offloaded their tools, the last day when they picked up their tools, and one day when Chris was under the

integral part of the team, though, he remained on board.

3. Barton wanted to save and reuse most of the deconstructed materials, so debris hauling was insignificant.
4. Pasquini spent extra time and attention to create a single, large material delivery from our traditional supplier, Builders Alliance, so we could minimize vehicle trips and not take them for granted.
5. Similarly, we challenged our Operations Manager Chris Frerichs to focus on a single delivery of tools and equipment, including two additional steel storage

6. Our Production Manager Joe Gillmer, who periodically visits our numerous job sites to check on quality and progress, was committed to the challenge but was days away from shoulder surgery. No way could he hop on his bike for this project.

The challenge proved to be about more than the time, passion, energy, vision and money that it takes to bring change to any organization's culture. It is about the need for internal champions; the need for community support; the need for flexibility amidst a team; the need for cooperation between a business and a client;

the need for addressing the dual challenges of peak oil and climate change. And, yes, this story is about two guys willing to take on something new and different.

Builders and Bikers

Our internal champions Pasquini and Yost both grew up using their

Pasquini's prior cycling experience was more substantial. He grew up on a BMX bike, riding dirt trails and hills, and then commuted to work in San Francisco for about four years in the mid '90s. Once or twice a week he would also bag recreational rides to the coast – about 40 minutes each way. But moving to Washington

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bikes to visit friends and assorted errands prior to being able to drive a car. Yost's commute to Barton's home, at 8 miles each way, proved to be the longest ride of his life! So he went out and bought a \$30 used Nishiki road bike prior to project commencement; his existing mountain bike felt inappropriate for this challenge.

Yost was concerned about feeling wasted working four 10-hour days at Barton's, with an eight-mile ride before and after work, but he ended up feeling rejuvenated. “When I got to Ellen's house in the morning I actually found that I had more energy than usual! And at the end of my work day I arrived back home feeling normal; not drained as I had feared.”

changed his style; he's hardly touched his bike.

Our challenge changed this. “I felt invigorated by the rides [5.5 miles each way]. I felt more awake and alive. And given my home life with my wife and toddler, the exercise was a welcome change!” said Pasquini. “It took me about 30 minutes a day of additional preparation time to deal with clothing, cycling equipment and tools; and like Yost, I arrived on site with additional energy. I was ready to have at it!” And again, like Yost, Chris came back home at day's end not feeling any more tired than had he drove his pickup each way. Bike riding, simply put, is energizing.

Additionally, we accepted Barton's offer for a private cycling classroom lesson before the project commenced – one very similar to what her office offers our community. The everybodyBIKE's First Gear Bicycle Class includes rules of the road, laws of the road, commuting hints, equipment preferences, confidence and comfort. She spent two hours with Pasquini and Yost, along with two other co-workers who wanted to sit in and absorb what they could. During the class, Pasquini suggested that our office staff would probably be in a better position to bike commute than our production team, since they wear more standard clothing than our carpenters. “Actually,” said Ellen, “most people say the opposite: wearing more formal clothing is a bigger barrier to biking.”

The Bottom Line

What about the social and environmental benefits we achieved as a result of Ellen's project? First, the hard data:

1. Pasquini bike commuted the five-and-one-half-miles each way for nine work days (20 minutes each way); by bus one day (40 minutes each way; he had a chest cold so he biked to the bus stop, put his bike on the bus; took the bus home along with his bike); by single-occupancy pickup two days (10 minutes each way).
2. Yost bike commuted the eight miles each way for 10 work days (40 minutes each way); by single-occupancy pickup two days (20 minutes each way).
3. One diesel truck delivery was made by our local lumber yard, Builders Alliance.
4. Frerichs, our Operations Manager, supported the crew by moving materials, tools and equipment.

336
(almost)

total number of miles biked

9

total pounds of carbon monoxide eliminated

\$40

amount saved in vehicle fuel costs

272

total pounds of carbon dioxide eliminated

He logged 30 miles in our small Toyota Tacoma pickup and an additional 30 miles in our one ton Chevy swap-loader. Although he bicycle commutes to our office at times, none of his trips to Barton's jobsite were at all practical by bike.

All in all, we biked 336 miles. Well, almost; 336 miles assumed that Gillmer, our Production Manager, didn't have a bum shoulder and was able to bike as well.

The environmental advantages look like this:

1. We eliminated 272 pounds of carbon dioxide (which contributes to global warming).
2. We eliminated one pound of hydrocarbon (which contributes to smog).
3. We eliminated nine pounds of carbon monoxide (a poisonous gas) from being emitted.
4. We (company and individuals) saved 14 gallons of gasoline representing a savings of about \$40.

What about our job costs? First know that we covered the additional travel costs created by the extra time involved. Barton paid nothing extra; we covered Pasquini and Yost's cycling time.

Just how much additional time are we talking about?

1. Pasquini spent 40 minutes extra time per round trip to the site, or 6.7 hours of cycling overall.
2. Yost spent 20 minutes extra time per round trip to the site, or 3.3 hours of cycling overall.
3. Gillmer (would have) spent 20 minutes extra time per round trip to the site, or 3.3 hours of cycling overall.

From a single-bottom-line perspective, our labor costs increased by \$332 for a project with total hard costs of \$8,322. That's an increase of about 4 percent in total cost.

That being said, life is not about single-bottom-line management. Let's

toss in the social and environmental benefits. Yes, more difficult to quantify, but that's never stopped us. Our efforts created:

1. Less traffic and pollution.
2. Healthier and happier employees.
3. A happier client.
4. Longer life expectancy for our trucks.
5. Less dependency upon petroleum.
6. A company focus upon better planning in general; fewer trips of any kind.
7. A new cultural buzz within our company, stimulating conversations about fitness, health and overall well being.

Biking in our Work Plan

What happened three months after Barton's project ended and our work cultural change? Yost and Pasquini are both enthusiastically looking towards the summer, and better weather, to hop back aboard their bikes. Pasquini told me that "he'll bike to work so long as the jobsites are within about 30 minutes of his home."

After completing Barton's project, we've identified another co-worker – Maggie Bates – as our in-house cycling champion. Bates has taken on the role of spreading the alternative transportation virus throughout our company. An avid cyclist herself, she often does a hybrid commute to



work, using a combination of bus and bike. Bates has given presentations about the Smart Trips program to both our design and production staffs. Also growing is our designers' use of bikes to make in-town trips to the building department, job sites and other errands. And we hope to further support our bikers by building a bicycle shelter at our office and showroom using natural building methods such as cob, straw bale or cord wood.

Three years ago, in celebration of our 50-year company anniversary, we designed and built a covered, 22-bicycle bikeport at our local Community Food Co-op. An unintended consequence of this gift was that A-1 Builders and the Community Food Co-op was awarded the 2006 Great Feets Award (from the Bellingham Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee) during Everybody Bike Month.

Amidst the numerous benefits of Whatcom's Smart Trips is a discount card they offer folks who have attained a certain number of alternative trips. A-1 Builders is joining the ranks of local businesses that offer these discounts. Ours will be a 50 percent reduction in a client's first two-hour design session.

A-1 Builders has also embraced a new cycling policy here. Although we don't pay our folks for their commuting time by car, we are going to pay for their additional time spent cycling. So if a carpenter's commute to a jobsite takes 15 minutes by car and 30 minutes by bike, we'll pay them for the additional 15 minutes each way. This will hold true when our jobsites are located in Bellingham's city limits; sites beyond this footprint may still be covered, at the discretion of management.

What about Barton's feedback, after the fact? From the client's perspective, what did she feel? Given her tight

“I think a typical client would easily accept a bike-oriented jobsite so long as they knew they weren't paying an additional price to incorporate their use.” -Ellen Barton



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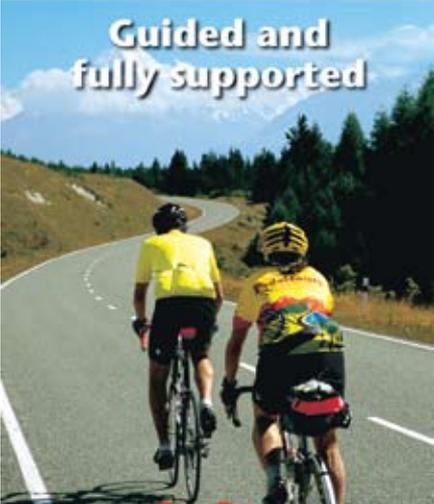


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building lot, more bikes led to less motor vehicles, and this was a good thing. And it sure didn't hurt for our client to be a passionate bike enthusiast. She offered our guys places to change their clothes as well as areas in which to store their bikes during the work day.

Barton's further input was to say that, "I think a typical client would easily accept a bike-oriented jobsite so long as they knew they weren't paying an additional price to incorporate their use." In-house we toyed with offering our clients an optional add-on price to support these this extra travel time, but we decided to absorb this extra cost on our own without asking our clients for this financial support.

Where will the infiltration of this cycling virus end? It's clearly infectious. We've been studying websites such as bikesatwork.com for work-oriented cargo bikes. We're reading "Cycling for Profit: How to Make a Living With Your Bicycle" by Jim Gregory. We're involved with Transition Whatcom's alternative transportation working group, seeking to identify our local leverage points to lobby for more bike-centric roads.

A further cultural shift within our company is to think about cycling from the moment a client accepts a proposal and says "Go!" We've even added a line item entitled 'discuss the applicability of cycling' to our project commencement checklist we call the Go Agenda. Right out of the starting gate we want to incorporate alternative transportation whenever possible.

Yet even when cycling is impractical for a particular project, Barton's job helped us focus on being diligent in minimizing the number of vehicle trips no matter what vehicles are being used: eliminate unnecessary material and equipment runs by better



planning; carpool our staff to out-of-town jobs as much as practical; and minimize the number of dump runs.

Go Green

In the future, when you select a builder, go green. They are most likely to entertain an idea such as incorporating cycling into their work. They are most likely to be thinking about life-cycle assessment: using techniques that seek to optimize the life expectancy of that which they build!

Perhaps our boldest message is to think local and green in all aspects of your spending. Combining cycling and contracting in the same breath is simply out of the box thinking. Where else in your world can you promote alternative transportation by simply asking for it?

Ask for the change you want to see in the world! You just might infect someone with a wonderful virus. |||

Rick Dubrow owns A-1 Builders (www.a1builders.ws) in Bellingham, Wash. His team is committed to outstanding workmanship and green, sustainable designs and culture.