



Environment

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# National Bicycling and Walking Study Five Year Status Report by the U.S. Department of Transportation

April 22, 1999

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## Introduction and Background

In 1990, Federal Highway Administrator Dr. Tom Larson described bicycling and walking as "the forgotten modes" of transportation. For most of the preceding decade, these two nonmotorized transportation options had been largely overlooked by Federal, State and local transportation agencies. An average of just \$2 million of Federal transportation funds were spent each year on bicycle and pedestrian projects, and the percentage of commuting trips made by bicycling and walking fell from a combined 6.7 percent to 4.4 percent. (1980 and 1990 U.S. Census data).

In the same year, the U.S. Department of Transportation adopted a new national transportation policy that, for the first time, specifically sought to "increase use of bicycling, and encourage planners and engineers to accommodate bicycle and pedestrian needs in designing transportation facilities for urban and suburban areas", and to "increase pedestrian safety through public information and improved crosswalk design, signaling, school crossings, and sidewalks." Years of neglect of bicycling and walking were about to come to an end.

The U.S. Congress wanted to know how the USDOT proposed to increase bicycling and walking while improving the safety of the two modes, and in fiscal year 1991 appropriated \$1 million to complete the *National Bicycling and Walking Study* (NBWS). The legislation outlined five specific tasks:

1. Determine current levels of bicycling and walking and identify reasons why they are not better used as a means of transportation.
2. Develop a plan for increased use and enhanced safety of these modes and identify the resources necessary to implement and achieve this plan.
3. Determine the full costs and benefits of promoting bicycling and walking in urban and suburban areas.
4. Review and evaluate the success of promotion programs around the world to determine their applicability to the role required of the U.S. Department of Transportation to implement a successful program.
5. Develop an action plan, including timetable and budget, for implementation of such Federal transportation policy.

Throughout 1991, input for the study was gathered from a wide variety of sources including staff from the modal administrations within the USDOT, agency field staff, State and local bicycle and pedestrian coordinators, a group of national experts, and from the general public. A *Federal Register* notice published in February 1991, generated more than 500 comments which were almost all strongly supportive of efforts to improve conditions for bicycling and walking.

In 1992, a series of 24 case studies was commissioned to investigate different aspects of the bicycling and walking issue. These reports gathered a wealth of information on bicycling and walking from around the world and provided a snapshot of the state of bicycling and walking in the United States in the early 1990s. The studies also highlighted information gaps, identified common obstacles and challenges to improving conditions for the nonmotorized traveler, and suggested possible activities and a leadership role for the USDOT.

On April 22, 1994, the Federal Highway Administrator and National Highway Traffic Safety Administrator walked the final report of the National Bicycling and Walking Study from the Department of Transportation to the U.S. Congress. The study contained two overall goals:

- to double the percentage of total trips made by bicycling and walking in the United States from 7.9 percent to 15.8 percent of all travel trips; and
- to simultaneously reduce by 10 percent the number of bicyclists and pedestrians killed or injured in traffic crashes.

In addition to these goals, the Study identified a 9-point Federal Action Plan with 60 specific action items for the Office of the Secretary, Federal Highway Administration, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and Federal Transit Administration; and a 5-point State and Local Action Plan with a range of suggested activities for State and local agencies.

The purpose of this report is to document what happened in respect to these goals and action plans in the five years since the Study was released. Chapter 2 provides an overview of progress towards the two national goals and the Federal, State and local action plans. Chapter 3 discusses the status of bicycling and walking within the Department of Transportation five years after the release of this landmark study. Chapter 4 identifies conclusions and recommendations for action that can reinvigorate the Department's commitment to achieving the overall goals of the study. A detailed assessment of how the Department has responded to each of the 60 action items in the 9-point Federal Action Plan is provided in Appendix 1.

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## **Chapter 2**

### **Assessing the Impact of the National Bicycling and Walking Study**

The National Bicycling and Walking Study was a landmark report that ushered in a period of unparalleled progress for bicycling and walking issues. Soon after Congress commissioned the Study, they also passed the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (1991) which opened up billions of dollars of transportation funds for bicycling and walking improvements. Spending of Federal transportation funds on these two modes rose from \$6 million in 1990 to more than \$238 million in 1997.

Many States and localities rediscovered bicycling and walking in the 1990s, and began devoting staff and financial resources to the creation of a more bicycle-friendly and walkable infrastructure. Buoyed by ISTEA and the National Bicycling and Walking Study (NBWS), the number of bicycling and walking professionals has grown to the point that they have established their own professional association with more than 250 members - in 1990 only a handful of States and cities had bicycle coordinators and none had a pedestrian coordinator.

The National Bicycling and Walking Study also stands out as the first time the Federal government has ever committed itself to modal split targets, i.e. achieving a certain percentage of trips by specified modes. This lead has since been followed in the both the United Kingdom and Australia.

The coupling of an increase in use with a simultaneous reduction in fatalities and injuries created a unique target which challenged the conventional wisdom that increasing use would increase crashes. Equally important, the twin goals were designed to ensure that gains in the apparent safety of the two modes were not achieved by discouraging use.

Implementing the National Study was also made more challenging by the changing role of the Federal government in the early 1990s. ISTEA and other trends of the day were reducing the ability and desire of the Federal government to mandate specific actions or to direct funding towards specific projects. States and local governments were gaining significantly more control over transportation planning, funding, and decisionmaking than had been the case previously.

Therefore, in writing the National Study the USDOT had to identify an appropriate role to play in encouraging and promoting the two goals without requiring specific actions at the State and local level, even though many of the improvements necessary to achieve the goals had to be made at the State and local level. The result was the adoption of a 9-point Federal Action Plan with 60 specific action items and a 5-point Recommended Action Plan for both State and local government agencies.

### ***Doubling the percentage of trips made by bicycling and walking***

The National Bicycling and Walking Study (NBWS) target of doubling the percentage of trips made by bicycling and walking from 7.9 percent to 15.8 percent was based on numbers collected in the 1990 Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey (NPTS). In 1990, a total of 18 billion walking trips and 1.7 billion bicycling trips were made representing 7.2 percent and 0.7 percent respectively of all trips counted by the study.

The NPTS was repeated in 1995, approximately one year after the release of the NBWS. The number of walking trips had increased to 20 billion but this figure was just five percent of total trips; bicycling trips increased to more than 3 billion, and were still less than one percent of all trips.

While this was much too soon after the release of the study to offer any real indication of progress (or failure) towards the goal of increasing use, the 1995 survey numbers do provide critical information on the challenges faced in meeting this target:

- While the number of both bicycling and walking trips increased (by 89 percent and 13 percent respectively) there was a simultaneous increase in the total number of trips by all modes of more than 50 percent. Increasing the percentage of overall trips made by bicycling and walking is going to be a tough challenge if the level of overall travel continues to increase at this rate.
- The survey methodology changed between the 1990 and 1995 survey from a telephone survey to a travel diary survey. This resulted in an increase in the reported number of trips overall.
- The NPTS only provides a national picture and is hard to relate to the State or local level. By contrast, the decennial U.S. Census (which shows 4.4 percent of journeys to work are made by foot or bicycle) information is available by census tract. However, the NPTS shows that only one in five trips are journeys to work. Thus, it is hard for any State or locality to accurately gauge how it is faring.

The next NPTS (and U.S. Census) is scheduled for the year 2000 and the results will likely be available in 2002 at the earliest. At that time, we will be able to provide a better assessment of the impact of the NBWS on the levels of bicycling and walking in the United States. Until then, there is insufficient information available on which to gauge progress on meeting the goal of doubling the percentage of trips made by bicycling and walking.

### ***Reducing fatalities and injuries suffered by bicyclists and pedestrians***

Progress towards to the second goal of reducing fatalities and injuries suffered by bicyclists and pedestrians by 10 percent is more easily gauged as crash statistics are collected annually.

In 1993, the last year prior to the release of the NBWS, 5,649 pedestrians and 816 bicyclists were killed in collisions with motor vehicles. In 1997, the last year for which data is available, these numbers had fallen to 5,307 and 813 respectively. While the pedestrian figures have shown a reasonably steady decline, the bicycle fatality number has