

How to Build a Bicycle Advocacy Organization

The Power of the Power Pyramid

By Charlie Gandy

When a handful of citizens in Minneapolis saw an opportunity to convert a dormant railroad yard into an urban park, they unconsciously deployed the power of the Power Pyramid. Within two years, their vision was achieved and the park opened. Now the Save Cedar Lake Park organization has broadened its goals to link the abandoned rail lines radiating out from the park to suburban parks throughout the metropolitan area, creating an extensive network of trails.

How did they do this? First, the citizens had a clear vision of the future of the rail yard. Second, they presented this vision to both Minneapolis Parks Board and the appropriate professionals in the parks and transportation agencies of the city. The Parks Board supported the project, the professionals endorsed the concept, and the number of citizens supporting the group now numbered in the hundreds. Next stop was City Council. With the support of the Parks Board, city staff and citizens, the decision was easy for the elected officials. Funding was secured and the vision was realized. The citizens were empowered, the city staff and politicians looked good and the Parks Board was doing its job. This is the power of the Power Pyramid in action.

How does it work?

Imagine a triangle. Sitting above the triangle is the person or agency with the power to approve or reject your project, to fund or not fund your program, usually the Governor, Mayor, City Council, or state legislature.

At the top point of the triangle are the professional staffs of the DOT or legislature, who are hired to provide technical expertise and to implement projects. On the right-hand point of the triangle is a citizen's advisory committee or board, appointed by elected officials to represent the community on specific issues, to review proposals and to make recommendations. In the left corner of the pyramid or triangle is the citizens group.

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Their role is to create a vision for the community and package and sell projects that will achieve that vision to the elected officials, professional staff and advisory boards. Going back to the Cedar Lake example in Minneapolis, we can see how these roles are played out. The citizens came up with a great idea and vision for their community. They built support for the project with the public, and turned this into members funding and political clout.

At the same time, they took the proposal to the Parks Board and professional staff for their endorsement. The Parks Board endorsement immediately made the City Council feel more confident that the project was politically feasible—as appointees of the council, the Parks Board will usually only endorse projects that are within the comfort zone of the council. They act as a kind of filter. Potentially embarrassing projects don't get endorsed. Projects that will make the city council look good will get endorsed. The Cedar Lake plan was one they liked.

The city's professional staff reviewed the project at the same time as the Park's Board. Their job is to make sure proposals such as these are technically feasible and, once again, within the comfort zone of the city council. The professionals often don't push their bosses very hard, or initiate projects, but they will respond to citizen proposals. In the case of Cedar Lake, there were no technical objections to the work involved, and in fact the idea fit well with their development plan for parks. The professionals liked the plan also.

When any one of the three points of the power pyramids oppose an idea, the result is fairly clear. The idea is unlikely to succeed. It can happen, but the odds are very much against it. Any City Council is hesitant to override citizen advisory boards or its own professional staff. An advisory board will hesitate before endorsing a proposal that didn't pass muster with the citizens group or professionals. The professionals won't endorse a project that conflicts with existing plans or that has controversial or radical new ideas.

A similar breakdown occurs when any of these groups is bypassed or does not exist.

Without a citizen's organization, the Council has no catalyst for proposals and no community vision. There is also a lack of political support for proposals. Without professionals, the Council has no way of knowing if a particular idea is technically feasible – or they'll get bad information from professionals in other disciplines. Without an advisory board the city council has no effective political filter.

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Lessons for Bicycle Advocacy

All three elements of the Power Pyramid are important. Each has to know and play their role if they are all to function smoothly and effectively. In the bicycle and pedestrian world, at least one of the three is usually missing or misplaced.

Where no bicycle or walking advocacy group exists there is no political power and no vision driving projects to completion. This can make it impossible for the bicycle program manager to get anything done and undermines the position of a bicycle advisory board.

Where no advisory board exists, there is no political filter between the advocates and the city council. Thus, all manner of projects are submitted to the city which may have no support in the community beyond a few hardcore bicyclists – and the city council, has no way of knowing which ones are going to work or not work. Consequently, they feel uncomfortable all of them.

Finally, citizen groups and advisory boards can be frustrated if there are no bicycle and pedestrian experts on staff – i.e. bicycle and pedestrian program managers – to follow through on everyone's good intentions, and to make politicians comfortable with the technical aspects of proposals.

There's an old political adage that "organized constituents get their way, disorganized constituents do not." Citizens do need to have their act together and they also need to have well trained professional and effective advisory boards in place and playing their roles. A strong and effective advocacy group can [and should] help create the other two positions on the triangle.

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