

# twin city sidewalks

...the view from the sidewalks of Minneapolis and Saint Paul...

10.8.15

## Bicycling Debate is Rooted in a Generation Gap

My dad owns five cars.\*  
Four of them actually  
run, and three of them  
are parked every day on  
the streets around his  
house in Saint Paul.

(So even though I  
haven't owned a car in a  
decade, from a familial  
standpoint, I'm hardly  
doing my part to  
minimize our impact on  
the environment.)

You see, my dad has  
always loved driving. So when three years ago the city planned a fancy new bike route  
next to his house, he came before the City Council to testify against the project.

From his perspective, it's understandable. Making parking more difficult, slowing  
down cars, spending tax dollars... For my dad, all of these things are nuisances. I can  
see why he wouldn't understand the need for a bike route next to his house. From his  
perspective, I get it.

Here's how my dad ended his testimony against the bike route *[about 1:10:00]*:

*[Lots of testimony... dramatic pause.]*

And my son's a biker. He rides a bicycle everywhere all the time, even in  
the winter. He would be totally in favor of that bike route. But there's no  
point in the roundabout at Portland and Griggs, and not much point in the  
rest of it.

## My Generational Perspective

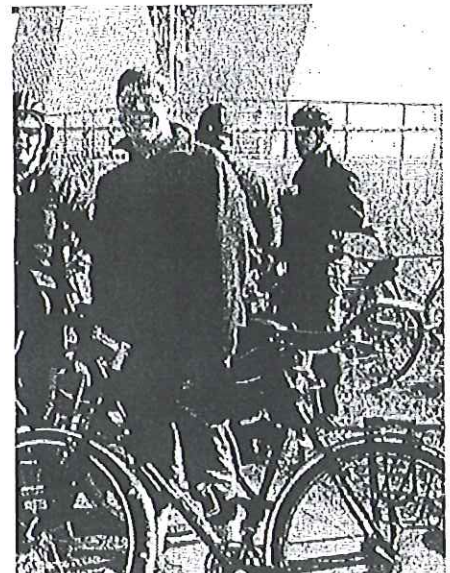
It's true. I've been living and bicycling  
around Saint Paul for ten years, and have  
devoted a great deal of my time to working  
on projects like the Griggs Bicycle  
Boulevard, so much so that I even wrote a  
dissertation about it.

But for me, after a decade of trying to ride  
in Saint Paul without getting killed, good  
bike routes are a big deal. After I heard  
that my parents testified against the bike  
boulevard that I'd been working on for  
years, I was a bit shocked. Since then, my  
father and I have had many (often  
fruitless) conversations about the project.

The bike route went ahead anyway, thanks  
to unique Federal funding and support by  
a few visionary city council members. And  
now, today, the traffic circle sits there at  
the end of my dad's street. His driving and  
parking experiences aren't impacted that



*[My dad and stepmom testifying against the Griggs traffic circle in 2012.]*



*[This is me. Look at that stupid rear blinky light.]*

much. In fact, he sometimes admits to enjoying tooling around the traffic circle.

I love my father, despite his many cars. And as the years have gone by, I think he's started to soften his stance against the bike route.

And every time I go to visit him, I bike there, often at night. As he watches me ride off, waving from the stoop, I know he wants me to be safe.

### Bridging the Generation Gap

Even though he still doesn't understand why the traffic circle was a good idea, I hope that I've talked him into trusting me when I tell him that it makes life safer for me as I make my way around Saint Paul. In fact, with a bike route on Griggs, I'm more likely to bike past his house and stop for an afternoon visit, and I know he loves when I pass by and say hello.

If you spend any time working on bike advocacy in Saint Paul or Minneapolis, you quickly realize that much of the debate is generational. For older people who have driven their whole lives, it's almost impossible to understand the bike movement. Time after time, attending public hearings you see a row of older people get up and testify about the importance of parking, and how bicycle infrastructure will ruin their quality of life. And it makes total sense given where these folks are coming from. The Baby Boomer generation has grown up driving cars.

The automobile generation gap is particularly apparent for me and my father. He has always loved driving. When he got to take the family on road trips across the country, it was probably the happiest I've ever seen him. Nothing compared to the freedom of the open road, with thousands of miles of interstate driving on the calendar. He still loves large American cars, the bigger the better, and will drive across town to save a few cents on a gallon of gas.

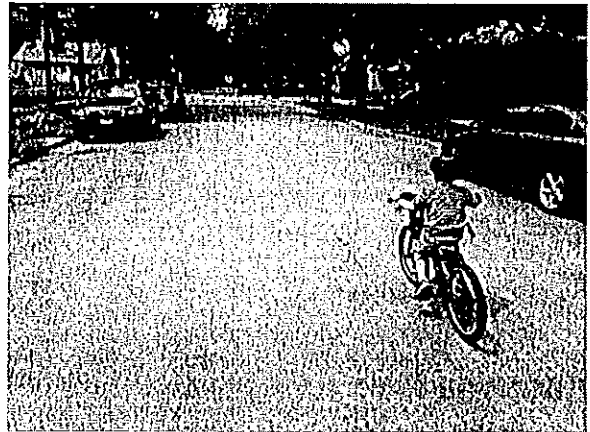
(I.e. he once simultaneously owned two Cadillac Fleetwoods, length 225 inches, or about 2.5 Smart Cars. Hint: that equals 5 Smart Cars, i.e. a "carzgo Yahtzee.")

### The Next Generation

I don't expect car dependent boomers like my dad to understand bicycling. And I don't expect them to get out from behind the wheel and start riding bikes around town. But I do expect them to listen and respect the next generation.

For the last few years, I've been trying to change his mind about the bike boulevard next to his house. Even though he still doesn't like it, I think he's started to listen. I feel like he's

beginning to understand that having bike routes is important to me, even if he doesn't get it.



*[My nephew Edgar learning how to ride a bike on Portland Avenue.]*

And really, that's all that younger people are asking. The next generation has different priorities than their parents. We don't want to have to drive everywhere. We don't necessarily want to own houses or two cars, and biking is a crucial factor to how we value our cities. All we're asking from our parent's generation, the people that are on social security and own lots of our national wealth, is that they give us a little bit of breathing room. That might involve small sacrifices on their part, maybe having to cross the street or pay a dollar to park, or to devote a little bit of tax money toward some bike-friendly concrete. But what we're asking isn't too much...

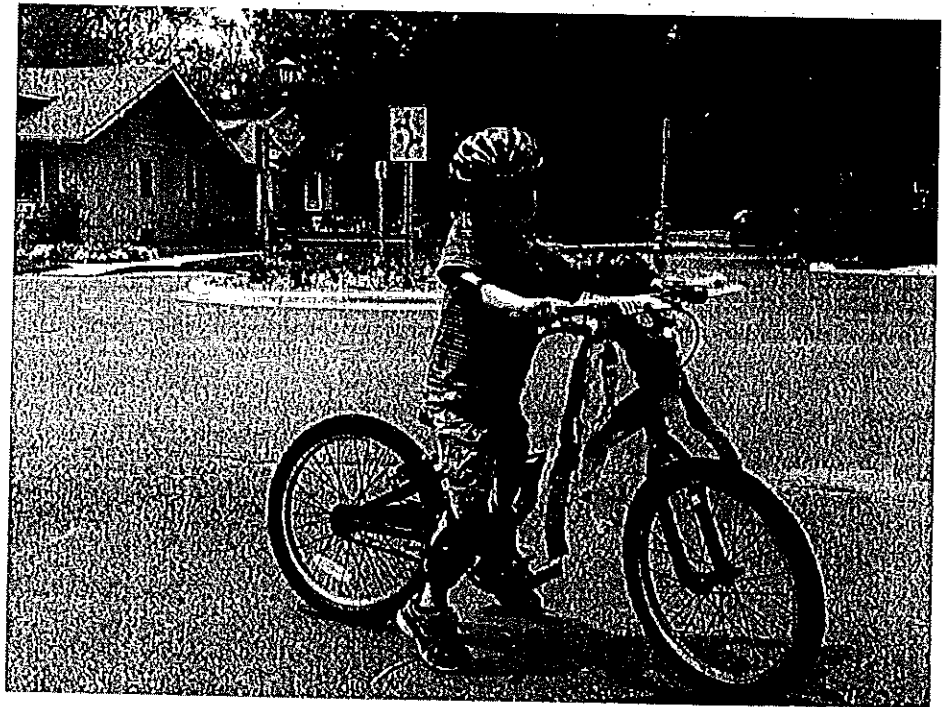
The other day I was over at my dad's house. I biked there, of course, and my little nephew Edgar was visiting. He's 6 years old and had just learned how to ride a bicycle of his own.

Edgar isn't that good yet. Basically, you still have to run alongside him while he pedals, holding his bike up so that he doesn't wobble over. He's all adorned in helmets, elbow and knee pads.

But it was pretty awesome to see him going down the street. I flopped along side in my sandals, trying to keep up. As he neared the bike boulevard and traffic circle at the end of the street, the very one that my dad had testified against three years prior, an SUV came speeding up. Thankfully, it slowed down and went around the circle as little Edgar pedaled away.

The streets we're building now are going to last for decades. They're not about my dad's generation. They're about my six-year-old nephew, and what kind of city he's going to want to live in as he gets older.

I can only hope that the older generation, the people who overwhelmingly vote, pay taxes, and show up for public meetings, can give the rest of us the benefit of the doubt. You don't have to understand everything about the new wave of city dwellers. All you have to do is listen. We need safe streets. It's time to make it happen.



*[Edgar in front of the Griggs Avenue traffic circle.]*