

The Power Pyramid

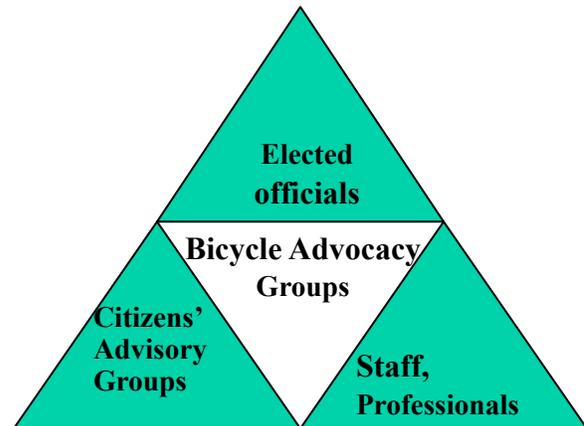
What's so dang important about organized advocacy?

By Marjorie Holderer, Vice President of Alabama Bicycle Coalition

Many thanks to Charlie Gandy

During the several years I have attended meetings, city planners, engineers, local elected officials, and ALDOT employees often said, "You people need to get organized." I thought of that as a polite yet supreme brush off. Returning the workload to the questioner. It sounded and felt like a great way to exhaust individuals into resigned submission to 'the way things are'.

Then I read about Charlie Gandy's Power Pyramid and bam, I 'got it'.¹ A bicycle advocacy organization provides the political power and the vision to drive projects to completion. When it is absent, the allies, champions, and implementers get mowed down as Lone Rangers or burned out into oblivion. Let me explain:



Looking at the illustration you can see there are 4 elements: Elected Officials, Staff and professionals, Citizens' Advisory Boards, and Bicycle Advocacy groups. Elected officials have the power to approve and fund projects. Staff and professionals provide technical expertise to implement projects. Citizens' Advisory boards review proposals and make recommendations. The Bicycle Advocacy groups exercise political will and create vision.

All four elements of the power pyramid must be present. In the Alabama cycling world, at least one or two of the 4 elements is missing or misplaced. The consequences have been costly to all Alabamians in terms of quality of life, health, safety, and independence.

Without political will and vision, it can be impossible for staff or citizens' advisory members to get anything done. When no advisory board exists, there is no political filter between advocates and elected officials. Thus all manner of projects are submitted, which may have no support in the community beyond a few hard-core bicyclists. The local elected officials have no way of knowing which ones will work. When there are no bicycle experts on the staff, advocacy and advisory group members are frustrated by the lack of follow through on everyone's good intentions, and to make the politicians comfortable with the technical aspects of proposals.

"Organized constituents get their way, disorganized constituents do not." Citizens must have their act together and have well trained professionals and effective advisory board members. A strong advocacy group can help create these positions on the pyramid. Cycling folks in Alabama haven't had an organized voice in nearly a hundred years. And we cannot ever expect anything to be different until after such an organization has a loud and frequently used one. Not only have we failed to 'get our share' at the table but our organized competitors, representing all other transportation interests, are getting it instead. We all know siblings don't leave your share of dinner on the platter when you aren't there.

¹"How to Build a Bicycle Organization: Part 6. The Power of the Power Pyramid." Charles Gandy. Pro Bike News. April 1994. National Center for Bicycling and Walking.