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Ideas and advice on how & why to establish a bicycle/pedestrian/non-motorized transportation advocacy organization

Advocacy organization

Advocacy is about developing relationships

An advocacy organization is a web or network of relationships among a group of people who support the cause you are advocating for

There are already many people in your community who support your cause.

But most likely they are working as individual units, not working within a network of relationships (or only within a small, restricted network)

Advocating for what?

On street bicycling

Community walkability (sidewalks, crosswalks, ped-accessible intersections, traffic calming)

Multi-use trails

Single track trails (mountain biking, hiking)

Safe Routes to School - education, encouragement, enforcement, engineering to help more kids walk & bicycle to school with greater safety

Disabled/wheelchair access

Transportation - recreation

Education/enforcement for drivers, pedestrians, bicyclists

Health

Traffic safety ("traffic justice")

Equestrian access

Motorized trail access

Etc.?

Some combination of all the above?

There is much power when groups with similar interests cooperate and work together towards shared interests

"Divide and be conquered"

If a group has 1 shared interest with yours and 19 conflicting interests, work with them on the 1 interest and just go your separate ways on the rest

Umbrella and peer organizations

Thunderhead Alliance - national alliance and 'incubator' for bicycle and pedestrian advocacy groups, <http://www.thunderheadalliance.org>

League of American Bicyclists, BikeLeague.org

International Mountain Bicycling Association, imba.com

Rails to Trails Conservancy, railtrails.org

Missouri Bicycle Federation - statewide alliance of bicycle and pedestrian advocacy groups, mobikefed.org

List of Missouri bicycle/pedestrian/running/trail clubs & groups - mobikefed.org/moclubs.php

Circles of interest

core, helpers (committee), supporters

naturally interested people - bike shops, existing rides/events, existing clubs, users, complainers

helpful people - staff, well-connected w/in community, well-connected politically, well connected to funding

user groups (ie, bike clubs) - don't depend on them to "do advocacy" nevertheless invaluable by their very existence; can help when public support is needed (just give them explicit instructions and much encouragement about what to do)

Membership vs non-membership

Most advocacy organizations have yearly membership in the \$20-\$30 range (with some way to encourage additional donations--higher membership levels, or just ask for extra donation)

Taking cost of time into account, membership is break-even at best. (You can come out ahead if the time to maintain some or most of your membership database, accounting, receipts, retention, new member recruitment is donated. You can also have a staff member whose main job is membership/recruitment and that person is an asset to your organization in many ways--and ensures a stable membership base--but does spend most hours dealing with membership recruitment & retention.)

Some organizations (PedNet.org, Columbia, Missouri) have therefore chosen to skip memberships altogether--they ask people to sign up to the "PedNet Vision" as PedNet supporters. So far about 5000 have signed up. They send these people monthly email newsletter etc. & count them as supporters--bring stack of signed "PedNet Vision" statements to city council meetings, etc.

You can combine these two methods--first get people, hundreds or thousands of people, to sign up in support of your vision. These are your "supporters". Then recruit supporters to become paying members. (And paying members who see progress & payoff for their membership become your best recruits for higher-level donations.)

Supporters

1. Advocates/citizens, 2. staff, 3. elected officials 4. Media

Each can do something the others can't.

May be able to get some of each on groups board or steering committee. Staff can often be "liaison" or on an "advisory committee". But even if not on the board or advisory committee, make them "friends" of the organization.

Funding for advocacy organizations

33% membership/donations

33% grants (mostly gov't grants or other gov't funding; 5% private foundation grants)

33% events

For financial stability, keep a balance among the three.

Communication

Reason: developing and maintaining relationships in your advocacy community

Email (yahoogroups.com)

Web site (blog)

Newsletter (keep it simple - don't let it sink your organization)

Difference between bike club & advocacy organization (club is about riding; advocacy is about changing policies; there is a relationship between the two but they are not the same)

Advocacy is all about people/relationships. It's personal. It's about developing a web of relationships.

Regular communication helps build this network of relationships

Tripod of web site/email/newsletter.

- Each reinforces the other
- Monthly email newsletter drives traffic to web site & vice-versa
- A significant number of people still are not regularly online/on email so the print newsletter is very important for them. Plus people will generally read more of a publication in print than in their email in-box
- If you can make 1 simple "blog-style" update to the web site each week, then you can
 - summarize web-page updates into a monthly email newsletter
 - summarize monthly email newsletters in a simple quarterly print newsletter

Don't let printed (or email) newsletter "sink the ship". It's a big job to put together a printed newsletter. Consider:

One-page printed newsletter (both sides of one page is enough; it's easy to make, easy to read, cheap to print)

How about just 2 or 3 times per year rather than monthly or quarterly (then supplement with monthly email newsletter, which is easier & cheaper)

Monthly email newsletter (can be as short as one headline and one paragraph)