

[LAB president: Tucson needs more commuters to compete](#) article from TucsonVelo.com courtesy of Mike McKisson



LAB President, Andy Clarke, left, poses with Perimeter Bicycling Association of America's Richard DeBernardis.

Andy Clarke, the president of the [League of American Bicyclists](#) is in town for a [series of events](#) over the next few days. I was able to sit down with him for 20 minutes at a reception dinner hosted by Richard DeBernardis and Perimeter Cycling.

We talked about where Tucson is and where it needs to head to be a Platinum Bicycle Friendly Community. Check out the conversation below.

The League of American Bicyclists focuses on commuter cycling instead of recreational cycling. Why is that?

On a purely practical level, for better or worse, the only trips that are counted as far as the official statistics are concerned are journeys to work. So if you want to register on the Census and American Community Survey data, we've got to have people doing those every day trips to and from work. That needs to show up. We need to be able to compete with Davis and Portland and Boulder and the San Francisco's and Minneapolis's of the world where there is two, three four times the volume of cyclists that you have here in Tucson.

That is on a very practical level. I think also on a more philosophical level, the everyday transportation stuff is very much more visible. It is very much more accessible. It makes the whole bicycling thing more accessible to people and less intimidating.

Your recreational cyclist is always lycra-clad, always on a \$3,000 bike, always with a bunch of like-minded and similar people. That can be intimidating to folks that are not used to riding, who are unsure about where to ride, who to ride with and just want to get to work or to the store.

I think the everyday more utility cycling piece is really important for changing the overall culture. It makes it more mainstream, more accessible, more believable that this stuff really makes a difference and really matters.

As long as it is primarily a recreational activity, it is too easy to cut it out of the budget when the time gets tough or too easy to dismiss it as a fringe special interest issue. That is what we need to get away from.

Every community has got recreational cyclists. You go to the less bicycle friendly places like Houston or Dallas or San Antonio (just to pick three places at random). They've got phenomenal bike clubs. They've got an amazing recreational cycling community there, but Houston basically totally sucks for everyday cycling.

You go to Portland, they still have the recreational scene but there's just bikes everywhere. There are people doing it for school, for work, for church, for social — for everything. That really changes the dynamic. That is probably the single biggest missing piece for Tucson to fix.

Tucson has increased its infrastructure, but hasn't seen an increase in commuter riders. What does that tell you?

It tells me that encouragement is a huge part of what needs to happen next. Encouragement that is fairly broadly defined. The kind of encouragement and advocacy type stuff that goes hand in hand. The kind of thing that ciclovía events embody.

Not to overuse Portland as an example — whenever they put a new bike lane or a new piece of infrastructure in, they make sure they also have a local community ride to introduce people to what the new thing was. It is really important now to just give people the extra incentive or push to get out there to use the the amazing infrastructure and the amazing opportunities that are here.

The vast majority of people, they just have no idea where the trail at the end of their street goes, where it could take them.

Gas prices will be a huge help. It's not something we can control or necessarily we want to see for other reasons, but inadvertently it will have the effect of forcing a bunch of people to say, "you know what? I am just going to try riding." They will discover that there are bike lanes everywhere and there is a great trail and greenways system and that there is every opportunity to make it work.

In a lot of cases, people have got bikes hanging in their garage, but literally don't know how to put air in the tires to get the thing riding again. If we can help people get past that hurdle we'll get them riding and they will be back in the saddle again. I think there is a lot of that we can do.

The good news is that you've had a couple ciclovías, there is a local advocacy group — the Living Streets Alliance, your own site [Tucson Velo]. There are more places and venues where you can see that happening. I think that will start to build a lot of momentum pretty quickly.

What are some of the positive and negative characteristics Tucson has for cycling?

I don't think I have got anything fantastically insightful. You've got outstanding weather. You've got all the geographic and climactic benefits going for you.

Of course what you have going against you is everything is very spread out. It is very suburban. The streets are big and the traffic is fast and the drivers aren't very good. Those are all certainly disincentives, but I think with the infrastructure you've got and the education programs you've got, I think you've got the opportunity to overcome those challenges. Those aren't insurmountable.

The desirability of cycling is evident from the hordes of people that come here for events, for training, for vacation. The vibrant bike community you've got going on here speaks volumes for the desirability of riding here.

Not wanting to over generalize, but you've probably got a fairly large under-served population who don't have a choice as to how they get around. For whom getting on a bike would actually be a really good practical alternative to walking or taking the bus or even doing it in combination.

You've got a lot of great attributes and a lot of great opportunities. It is time to step up and take advantage of them.

What three things should the region be doing to improve?

Number one, take the ciclovía annually to monthly or weekly. There is no reason why you guys shouldn't be doing something like that on a much more regular basis. I think that has the opportunity to be really transformative.

The second is what some places call "smart trips" or individualized marketing programs that give people the information, encouragement and the opportunity to get out and ride.

Thirdly, probably just closing the gaps in the infrastructure. Making sure the missing links in the network are filled and continue to build that network. Complete it where you've got big gaps, but also with bike boulevards and other things, keep adding to it. That can never get to be too big.

What type of facilities should the region focus on building?

One of the exciting things about the work that is going on in Portland is the break down they have documented with the population of Portland with the different types of cyclists. [Strong and Fearless, Enthused and Confident, Interested, but Concerned and No Way No How. [Read more about the groups here.](#)]

Different types of bike infrastructure play to different audiences. I think you've got the opportunity with bike boulevards and with some of the higher quality, innovative protected bike lanes and extensions to the trail system to really tap into the Interested, but Concerned population.

Bike lanes, you need to continue adding them when you can, when resurfacing is happening, when new streets are being built and making that as routine and normal as possible. That will happen over the next five years or 10 years. Those gaps will close in the on-street system.

I think there is a real opportunity to focus on some higher quality routes that are going to attract people who right now just don't see themselves out on Speedway, however good the bike lane.

It is hard. You need all of it. What we see in other Platinum level communities and even Gold communities is that you can't just have trails or just have bike boulevards, or just have bike lanes. You really do need it all, but obviously with the financial system being what it is, you can't have it all in one go so it is hard to prioritize.

Anything else you would like to add?

I am excited to be here to see how things are changing. To me, the the advent of Living Streets Alliance, the ciclovía events, your site and some of the stuff that is happening is a really critical changing of the guard that is going to propel you to Platinum.

Are we going to get Platinum level?

(Clarke wouldn't tip his hand, but said at this moment we aren't a Platinum community because our Platinum application hasn't been submitted and reviewed yet. Here is what he did say...)

There is still work to be done. I haven't seen what the crash numbers are. That has been an anxiety. I know there has been a big focus on that. You guys are doing more in the enforcement area than almost anywhere else, so that is definitely good. The safety story has not always been the best here and that is something we have got to work on.

Even if you guys don't make Platinum, you are still one of the poster children of the program for us. The story of what Tucson is doing — what you have been doing for the last six or seven years — is really extraordinary and something we happily tell people about all over the country, all over the world.