

Pedaling Produce for Village Building Convergence, Portland

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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This is the time for petroleum-free, sustainable transport. What better opportunity to do so when the motor-vehicle manufacturers are on the ropes, as they should be? We have to take care of local needs with local resources. Sorry you Big Money boys, move over for real community building -- to me, this is the spirit of the Village Building Convergence, Portland, Oregon, in its ninth year, from June 5-14.

In February, on behalf of Culture Change, I offered the twin concepts of sail power and pedal power at the vision-planning meeting for this year's Village Building Convergence (VBC). The enthusiasm in the room was palpable. One of the attendees who came forward to exchange contact info with me was Jeff Holiman. Over the months he and I visited farms and rivers with other enthusiasts interested in integrating the VBC with Sail Transport Network and Pedal Power Produce.

Taking heart from the excellent examples of the Puget Sound's Sail Transport Company, and the many pedal-power activists in Oregon and beyond, we proceeded to chart what might be Portland's future food supply/distribution system. We held many meetings to prepare ourselves and any volunteers to provide not just the VBC with some meals without polluting petroleum, but to establish long-term relationships with farms, gardeners and the whole bicycling sector.

Portland has potential for sustainability because of positive programs and attitudes that protect green space (e.g., the state's Urban Growth Boundary law), a good climate for growing food, and its greatest resource: many wonderful people. So it rains like crazy and there are still all too many single-occupant motor vehicles on too much pavement. But the future is up to us, the people, and not Washington, DC or Salem the state capital. The challenge is that the future's rushing right through the door -- whether people are prepared or not.

One of the special features of Portland is the occurrence of over a dozen neighborhood intersections made into community centers. Designed to slow down cars and give residents a focal point with bulletin boards, free tea, book-exchange shelves, and benches made of cob, these charming spots are the work of a nonprofit group called City Repair. In an annual effort to bring in other groups' efforts, such as natural building, permaculture and depaving, City Repair through its VBC project brings together not just Portlanders but activists, speakers and musicians from other states and nations.

The VBC is going on right now, in various parts of Portland. The main meeting hall is a school in the hip Southeast portion of town. People had during the first dinner some mighty fine vegetables and strawberries biked to the hall right from the farm. There is additional bike-transport to happen from farmers' markets and corporate donors such as health food stores. But our own circle of sailors and bikers wanted to cut out the trucker middleman and negate the petroleum factor that many otherwise green folks cannot seem to do unless they grow their own food.

"It was the perfect day to pedal produce; a cool day with misty drizzle most of the day, interrupted by breaks of photon streams and steady rain. The cargo bike was a real delight to pedal, making the load easily manageable. I highly recommend the route through NO-PO (north Portland and across the St. Johns bridge). It was good to get off HWY 30 as early as possible. The climb coming back from the island up to bridge is a bit of grunt, but then it is mostly all downhill from there.

I feel really fortunate to have been able to participate in the experience. Thank you Jan et al for sharing the vision of STN / bike cargo network! Now I can't wait to learn to particulars of jibbing."

- Jeff Holiman

We learned a lot about the challenges of re-wiring the VBC to use bike carts and sailboats for the meals for 100-300 people for ten days. We had the resources -- sailboats, crew, bikes, bike-trailers, farm contacts, communication -- but we were but transport specialists, and not food-coordinators or purchasers. As this dawned on us as the VBC drew near, we also had to figure on difficulties of non-engine sailing when Portland's rivers' currents go a few knots per hour. Additionally, when we located farms in remote areas such as on islands, how was the produce supposed to get from the farm to the sailboat unless there were carts we could pedal? It was simple to round up bikers to get the food from sailboats loaded with produce at the docks, to bike to the VBC, just as it's easy to round up bikers to take urban farmers' markets' excess produce donated to the VBC.

So we ended up revising our objectives and tactics, just to demonstrate for the VBC what can be done, in hopes of doing much more in future. This is why Jeff Holiman got a cargo bike promised to us for the VBC by Clever Cycles, a public-spirited business. (The Dutch machine costs over \$2,000 but carries over one hundred pounds of children, pets, food, etc.) Jeff pedaled it to an island farm. We loaded it with rhubarb, peas, lettuce, basil, scallions, and strawberries, giving a check to farmer Don Kruger for \$114 (reflecting a kind wholesale-discount), and off Jeff went to the VBC with leg-power. Not far was a sailboat with the capacity and availability to take the produce close to the VBC kitchen, but the wind was nil.

We plan to sail something for the hungry activists to charge their imaginations. We also hope to present Wild Girl Becky Lerner to the crowd so she can tell about the potential for foraging. We don't quite know what will happen or how things will go for our efforts and dreams for this VBC, but we have learned a lot about the process and we'll let you know! For the official word on the VBC, here's an article from the City Repair website with the helpful link. - JL

The VBC is a 10-day event held each spring, where a convergence of citizens, natural builders and activists come together to help neighborhoods design and build their own community amenities. Working together, we can turn our neighborhoods into Villages - one workparty at a time!

VBC9 will include hands-on education in permaculture design and construction, ecological building, and public art. All projects are built through collaboration, community conversations and commitment of a neighborhood to strengthen itself. Everyone is invited to attend evening events at a central location, to participate in workshops or listen to visionaries speak about various aspects of sustainable culture.

VBC will feature projects located in or adjacent to the public right of way and private projects that support community in various neighborhoods. Private site projects will be structures or systems that are built by and available to the communities concerned with that site, and hopefully available to some extent to the larger community. These will include public squares and meeting houses, community kiosks and benches, solar-powered and artistic innovations, and many other new ideas. Each project is initiated and managed by neighborhood groups with support from the VBC Placemaking Committee. The Placemaking coordinators help neighborhoods facilitate and coordinate the outreach/public involvement process, community decision-making and design workshops, and the permit process with the City.

The VBC9 Theme - Momentum: Powered by the People - was chosen to reflect the collaborative energy and creative forces that citizens can build together. We hope to generate momentum to strengthen the community voice throughout Portland and beyond.

We are excited to announce our venue and collaboration with the New Day School this year. VBC9 evening events will

be held at the New Day School Annex, located at 1847 SE Clinton Street, Portland, OR 97202.

Tickets sold at City Repair HQ, 3125 E Burnside / outdoor info shelf), Blend, Three Friends, and Grendel coffeeshops, Red & Black Cafe, KBOO community radio, City Bikes Annex info kiosk, Beulahland and other favorite hangouts soon.

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Online info for details on VBC tickets and more:

cityrepair.org/events/vbc/

Sail Transport Company

Sail Transport Network

Pedal Power Produce