

A History of CABO

by Alan Wachtel



Since 1972, California's bicycle clubs have been organized into a state federation known as the California Association of Bicycling Organizations, or CABO (the A is long). I can't say whether CABO was the first state bicycle federation, or whether it should be considered a model federation, but its history illustrates what bicyclists can accomplish by working together.

League members, more than most bicyclists, understand the importance of government and politics to bicycling. The roads we ride on are almost all designed, built, and maintained by public agencies; so are special facilities such as bike lanes, off-road paths, or parkland trails. These agencies also operate many buses and trains. And laws directly affect how we ride and even where we can ride.

In many cases the decisions involved are local. When it comes to patching or sweeping residential streets, or installing secure bicycle parking downtown, bicyclists need to get involved with city and county governments. But local action is not always enough. In California, most vehicle laws are enacted by the state legislature in Sacramento, not by city councils. Most of the funding for roads comes from the state or through regional agencies. And the state has so many people—nearly 30 million—and (with its favorable climate) so many bicyclists, and it is so vast geographically, that no local club can keep track of what is happening everywhere.

CABO was formed to protect bicyclists' interests statewide. From the beginning it was thought of as a federation of clubs and other organizations interested in bicycling, rather than as an organization of individuals belonging to the member clubs.

CABO began in 1972 at the All-California Bicycle Club Convention at Asilomar, on the Monterey Peninsula, which was sponsored by the Grizzly Pedal Pushers and the L.A.W. and supported by the Bicycle Institute of America. The convention wrote a set of by-laws, elected officers, and set CABO's initial priorities. There were to be four statewide meetings a year.

About 60 people attended this first convention. That number may seem small for a state the size of California, but it was not matched for many years.

CABO was fortunate during its early years. State government, under Governors Ronald Reagan and Jerry Brown, was sympathetic to bicycling. The state Highway Department had been reorganized as the Department of Transportation (known as Caltrans) and was eager to cooperate with bicyclists. In addition to the usual officers, CABO appointed eleven district directors, one for each of the geographical districts into which the new Caltrans organization had divided the state. (All these bicyclists were unpaid volunteers.) Caltrans soon established an Office of Bicycle Facilities, under Dick Rogers, to deal exclusively with bicycle issues.

CABO also had help in the California legislature, notably from Senator James Mills of San Diego, the powerful President pro tempore of the state Senate. In 1973 Senator Mills introduced a resolution (Senate Concurrent Resolution 47, or SCR 47) creating an ad hoc Statewide Bicycle Committee, including bicyclists, to propose changes in state bicycling laws. John Forester represented CABO on this committee, and many other bicyclists and bicycle clubs were consulted.

The committee made a number of important recommendations that were enacted into law in 1975 and 1976. For example, local control over the bicycling rules of the road was eliminated. State law would preempt any local regulation; no longer could cities or counties prohibit bicyclists from roads (except freeways), require the use of a sidepath, or keep bicyclists from making vehicular-style left turns.

In addition, the old law requiring bicyclists always to ride as far right as practicable was amended to apply only to bicyclists moving more slowly than other traffic. Exceptions were provided for making left turns, passing other bicyclists, avoiding debris or hazards, and riding in lanes too narrow for other traffic to pass safely. The new formulation, although far from perfect and still widely misinterpreted, was a great advance over the restrictive old law and has been widely copied.

Finally, the legislature passed the California Bikeways Act, requiring Caltrans to establish standards that all bicycle facilities (paths, lanes, and routes) would have to adhere to and establishing minimum levels of funding for state and local projects.

These accomplishments did not come without a struggle. There was strenuous opposition from non-bicyclists within the SCR 47 committee, and also in the legislature. CABO's success can be attributed to the technical knowledge and perseverance of the bicyclists involved and to our ability to understand and work within the state government process (with help from

sympathetic and powerful friends).

As part of the California Bikeways Act, Caltrans established a temporary Statewide Bicycle Facilities Committee to develop rational planning and design standards for bicycle facilities. John Scott represented CABO on the committee, with Bill Bliss and John Forester also providing advice. These standards, issued in 1978 as the "Planning and Design Criteria for Bicycles in California" (popularly called the Blue Book), have become a model for other states.

There was still more good news. In 1977 Caltrans initiated a freeway shoulder study to determine where and under what conditions bicycle travel might be better served by opening freeway shoulders rather than by circuitous, hilly, or non-existent alternate routes. As a result, Caltrans established uniform standards for opening freeways to bicycles and increased the road miles available from 550 to over 1,000. Bicyclists then fought back a bill in the legislature that would have prohibited bicycling on any freeway (ostensibly to protect children).

These impressive accomplishments, achieved by dedicated and knowledgeable bicycle activists under a friendly state government, may have left bicyclists overconfident or unprepared for adverse circumstances. In 1983, newly elected Governor George Deukmejian abolished the Caltrans Office of Bicycle Facilities and reduced both state spending on bicycle projects and local aid, which had been running in total at approximately \$5 million a year, to the statutory minimum of \$360,000 a year each. Bicyclists saw these unexpected and unwelcome changes as politically motivated: Caltrans highway engineers resented the outgoing Brown administration's attention to "exotic alternative modes of transportation" and eliminated bicycle programs in retaliation.

In response, CABO, through its legislative liaison Steve Sanders, who was also the League's State Legislative Representative, decided to establish a permanent lobbying office in Sacramento. This office was known as the Bicyclists of California Action Project (BoCAP) and had one part-time, underpaid employee, Letha Ade. Letha organized the All-California Bicycle Convention held at the State Capitol in Sacramento in 1983. Ralph Hirsch, then National Legislative Director of the League, was one of the convention's opening speakers.

Early in 1984, CABO and BoCAP sponsored Assembly Bill 3933 (AB 3933), authored by Assemblyman Tom Bates of Berkeley, to increase statutory bicycle funding to \$4.5 million. Bicyclists from all over the state were organized to write letters to their Assembly Members and Senators; Letha lobbied members of legislative committees; bicyclists testified at hearings. Caltrans, previously our great

friend, opposed the bill. It eventually passed and was signed by the Governor—no small accomplishment in that political climate—but in order to pass, the bill had to be significantly amended. In its final form, it did not require Caltrans to spend any money immediately. Only if Caltrans ever ran out of its state match for Federal Highway Aid, which seemed unlikely, would it be obligated to apply for \$4.5 million a year in federal aid for independent bicycle projects that, under law, needed no state match.

The relationship between CABO and BoCAP had never been clear, either to the people involved or to bicyclists around the state. In addition, funding BoCAP was a continuing problem. In 1985 BoCAP was reorganized as BikeCal under the direction of Patti and Steve Kolb, but this arrangement also proved unsuccessful. The following year Steve Sanders proposed that CABO join the Planning and Conservation League (PCL) in Sacramento as a board member.

PCL is a non-profit coalition of environmental groups whose purpose is to lobby for environmental legislation at the state level, much as CABO tries to represent a variety of bicycle groups. Because bicycling is an environmentally sound method of transportation, PCL and CABO have many objectives in common. The full-time PCL staff is intimately familiar with the legislative process and has long-standing working relationships with many individual legislators—a necessity when dealing with a professional legislature such as California's. CABO, for its part, provides the necessary bicycling experience and technical knowledge. This arrangement has proved to be much more effective for CABO than acting entirely on our own.

After AB 3933, CABO occupied itself largely with a holding action. The biggest excitement came in 1986, when a bill (AB 3912) was introduced by a San Diego legislator to restore local authority to prohibit bicycles from roads (again in the name of protecting children). CABO's campaign against the bill produced an overwhelming reaction from the bicycling community, and as a result of the ensuing letters to legislators it was never brought up for a committee hearing.

During this time we were also closely involved with battles against proposed ordinances in several counties that threatened to limit or prohibit organized rides such as centuries and possibly even routine club rides. CABO, which had set aside a legal fund for just such a purpose, and the Eagle Cycling Club of Napa County within a whisker of suing Napa County to invalidate a proposed restrictive ordinance. At the last second this threat proved credible enough to induce the county board of supervisors to back down.

With the executive branch of state government largely hostile, CABO devoted

its efforts to cultivating relations with the legislature. We are particularly lucky to have had strong support from Richard Katz, chairman of the Assembly Transportation Committee. With the help of Assemblyman Chris Chandler of Yuba City, CABO sponsored a bill to clarify a section of state law that could conceivably have been interpreted to prohibit bicyclists from riding on the shoulder of a road. It passed in 1988. CABO also successfully sponsored a non-binding 1990 legislative resolution, sponsored by Assemblyman Sam Farr of Monterey, permanently designating the Pacific Coast Bicentennial Bike Route. This very popular route had been established in 1976, but its designation had expired in 1983.

CABO also took positions on bills prohibiting bicyclists from wearing headphones (for), requiring children five years old or younger who are passengers on bicycles to wear helmets (neutral), and requiring sand and gravel trucks to be covered to prevent spillage (for). All three bills eventually became law.

CABO also became involved in mountain bicycling issues. Although CABO tries to represent all bicyclists, including commuters, tourists, racers, and recreational and utility riders, independent mountain bike advocacy groups also sprang up to meet growing resistance to mountain bicycles on public lands, and we worked with these groups to protect bicyclists' access. CABO's Bill Bliss was appointed to the state Recreational Trails Committee and was instrumental in formulating a policy for dealing with mountain bikes in state parks.

These efforts bore fruit in 1990. Public sentiment against taxes had kept California's gas tax unrealistically low, and the highway program had stalled badly. After years of wrangling, the legislature and the Governor agreed to put a gas tax increase on the ballot for public approval in June 1990. This measure, Proposition 111, also redirected the state's transportation funding priorities toward eliminating congestion.

There were no express provisions for bicycle programs in the package, but Assemblyman Katz, one of its principal authors, felt very strongly that bicyclists had been short changed. A new Caltrans director, Bob Best, had modified the department's previous emphasis on highway construction and was ready to provide for a variety of transportation modes. With the prospect of ample funding from Proposition 111 and repeated encouragement from Assemblyman Katz's office, Caltrans agreed to resume applying for federal aid for bicycle projects and to reinstitute a bicycle program of some kind. The details of this program have not yet been worked out.

This arrangement put bicyclists in an enviable position. Proposition 111 passed—but if it had failed, California

would have run short of its state match for federal highway aid, and AB 3933, the result of our earlier work, would still have obliged Caltrans to apply for these funds.

At the same time, frustrated by the indifference of the Deukmejian administration to environmental issues, PCL began to bypass it by organizing petition drives to place voter initiatives directly on the ballot. In 1989 PCL began planning an initiative to raise \$2 billion in bonds for rail facilities. As a member of PCL, CABO was able to have \$20 million for local bicycle facilities incorporated into the proposal, as well as provisions for bicycle access to trains and ferries funded by the bonds. In return, CABO endorsed the initiative, Proposition 116; member clubs circulated petitions to qualify it for the ballot, and clubs and cycling publications publicized it widely. The initiative passed in June of 1990. CABO is now involved in writing the guidelines for grant applications.

In addition to its political activities, CABO (mostly in the person of Bonnie Powers) publishes a periodic Master Calendar of Bicycling Events, acts as a clearinghouse of cycling information, distributes a bibliography of California bicycle touring literature, and serves as a liaison to local individuals and clubs. The district directors are constantly at work on a variety of local issues. After retiring as CABO president in 1984, I became government relations director—the chief volunteer lobbyist—and also the League's State Legislative Representative.

There are still four meetings a year. Two are board meetings and two are general membership meetings, at which club representatives can vote. The meetings alternate between Northern and Southern California.

Fundraising no longer seems to be a serious problem. CABO now receives funds from the annual Mt. Hamilton Challenge ride, and several clubs, including the Eagle Cycling Club, have made

generous donations. CABO also receives nominal income from member club dues and Master Calendar subscriptions. The principal expense is the annual PCL dues payment (now \$2500).

A much more difficult problem for CABO, as it is everywhere, is finding individuals willing to serve as CABO officers and district directors. The work can seem overwhelming, and it is often frustrating. A few people, such as Bill Bliss, Ruth Barnes, and Bob and Bonnie Powers, have been in active in CABO almost from the beginning.

Organizing grassroots support from affected bicyclists is also a challenge. Most bicyclists, of course, just want to ride their bikes; they don't want to write letters, attend meetings, or serve on committees. When there is an imminent threat such as AB 3912, the response is immediate and gratifying; at other times it can be a struggle.

CABO has been successful in protecting bicyclists' interests, even in adverse times, for a variety of reasons. Our officers and directors are experienced and knowledgeable bicyclists who are determined to stand up for bicyclists' rights. We do our homework, presenting our arguments carefully and calmly and trying to be reasonable and fair to the other parties involved. We have learned how state government works, what it responds to, and where to go for help. Over the years we have made valuable friends in PCL and in the legislature, and we are usually not important enough to have made powerful enemies. We can count on grassroots support when we need it. We are persistent. These are lessons that should be useful to bicyclists in any state.

Alan Wachtel is the past president and current government relations director for CABO. He has been commuting to work by bicycle for twenty years and looks forward to when his children graduate from their bicycle trailer to their own bicycles.



Cyclists on the 1988 Tour of Napa Valley, a ride which was the focus of CABO's fight against restrictions on group bike rides.