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## Congress battles over car-free transportation

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Wednesday, May 9, 2012

### Washington --

Congress opened negotiations Tuesday on a new transportation bill as bicycle and pedestrian groups fought to defend programs, including one in Marin County, that build bike paths and sidewalks to make it easier for people to travel without a car.

The programs that make up most federal support for biking and walking - dubbed "safe routes to schools," "recreational trails" and "transportation enhancements" - make up less than 2 percent of all federal transportation funding. Republicans have targeted the programs for elimination or cutbacks in the House and Senate as a way to save money and stop what they call unnecessary spending on such things as transportation museums.

House and Senate negotiators, led by Sen. [Barbara Boxer](#), D-Calif., began trying to meld the Senate's \$109 billion, two-year bill with efforts by House Republicans to raise money for highways by opening all U.S. coasts to oil and gas drilling, and building the Keystone pipeline between Canada and the Gulf Coast.

Supporters of bicycle and pedestrian programs pointed to the success of the Marin County effort that increased bicycle transportation by 68 percent and walking by 23.7 percent from 2007 to 2010, while adding 9.4 million miles of nonmotorized travel in that time period.

The project encouraged more children to walk or bike to school and opened new commuter corridors, including a "greenway" from the Sonoma County line south to the [Golden Gate Bridge](#). Part of the new trail uses an old railroad bed to take cyclists from San Rafael to the Larkspur ferry.

Marin County was mapped for the safest, most direct or most scenic bicycle routes and marked with route numbers, while businesses contributed by installing hundreds of bicycle racks.

### Reducing car traffic

County planners discovered that 22 percent of [cars](#) in morning weekday traffic were ferrying children to school, said Steve Kinsey, president of the Marin County Board of Supervisors and a key proponent of the experiment. Some schools were able to reduce car traffic by 70 percent.



"Republicans need to get their heads out from under the hood of a car and realize that Americans need healthier choices and safer choices," Kinsey said. "We have found that when people know how to bike safely and have safe choices, for trips of less than 3 or 4 miles, biking is a really viable option."

The project was 1 of 4 in the nation that Congress approved six years ago to determine whether adding paths, sidewalks, signage and other efforts could get people out of their cars. The \$100 million project, authorized as the Non-motorized Transportation Pilot Program, allocated \$25 million to each project.

Marin County was considered a "topographical challenge" because of its hills, while Sheboygan County, Wis., and Minneapolis have extreme winter weather and Columbia, Mo., needed support from large institutional employers.

Results from the nationwide test, released last week, showed an average 49 percent increase in bicycling, a 22 percent increase in walking and 32 million miles of vehicle travel averted from 2007 to 2010.

"Everybody isn't going to walk and bike, everyone can't walk and bike, but small increases can represent huge savings, both to the public and to persons individually," said Marianne Fowler, head of federal relations for the Rails to Trails Conservancy, a group that promotes cycling.

The House transportation bill gutted bicycle and pedestrian programs and Republican leaders could not pass it despite several attempts. They finally resorted to extending the current law.

### **Rare cooperation**

The Senate bill passed on a rare bipartisan vote of 74-22 after partisan differences were worked out between Boxer, who chairs the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, and the top committee Republican, Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla.

Inhofe sought to cut the pedestrian and bicycle programs, but Boxer preserved most of them, with some concessions.

Bicycle and pedestrian programs "believe it or not, caused the most anguish and were the hardest to come to an accord on," Fowler said. She said the Senate bill scales back each of the programs to some extent, such as allowing governors to opt out of spending for recreational trails to divert the money to highways.

Fowler said that while Oklahoma City has started its first bike-share program with the full support of its mayor, Republicans such as Inhofe from rural states remain adamant that federal transportation money go to highways alone. She insisted that cycling and walking can work in small towns, too.

Marin County has spent \$40 million so far on its bicycle and pedestrian program and Kinsey said a complete build out will cost \$200 million. In addition to the federal grant, the county passed a half-cent sales tax, 12 percent of which goes to the school program. He said the Bay Area is moving toward adopting Marin's safe-routes-to-schools model.

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