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Interview with Jim Middaugh, Metro, 2011 (audio)

Jim Middaugh

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Interview Index

Interviewer: Teddy Messan

Interviewee: Jim Middaugh of BTA and Metro

February 25th, 2011

1. How long have you lived in Portland? 10:16 am

He has lived in Portland since 1992, which means he has lived in there for over 18 years. He has been to 34 states and several cities, including Washington DC, where he met his wife.

2. What brought you to Portland [if you were not born here]? 10:20 am

His wife got a promotion in Portland Oregon, and that brought him here, where he also found a job, at Trimet, in fact.

3. How did you get involved in your work /Why did you decide to join the BTA? 10:22 am

He worked at Trimet, and one day, his wife used the car, so he could not get to work on time. He decided to bike, and realized what a practical means of transportation it was, and decided to take what he called an “activist approach” to his discovery and contribute to making bicycling an activity in which more people engage. He did some research and found that there was an organization with similar goals, BTA. He then decided to apply. After a few years in the organization, he decided that he wanted to tackle more responsibilities and applied as director of communication for BTA.

4. Having had work experience with Metro, how did you use that experience in your works with BTA? 10:23 am

By the time he started working for BTA, he had established personal relationships with people with authority such as the mayor and the chief of staff at BTA, and he had access to the important people: the decision makers. He used those personal relationships to advocate for work in certain areas such as how to meet the greenhouse emissions issues, asking questions about active transportation, and

adapted the way Metro-the other company he is currently working for, aside from BTA- allocates resources for transportation, to BTA, as he thought it was useful to the Non-profit organization.

5. Please describe some of your favorite projects or achievements working with the BTA?

He did not have anything significant to say about this, except that he contributed his share and more when possible/needed.

6. Please describe a typical day / week / event? 10:25 am

A typical day for Jim MIdaugh at BTA includes taking care of financial matters, allocating resources, and evaluating performances from staff. He also gets in touch with long-lost members who used to donate but then, for some reason, stopped having any contact with the NPO. Also, when it comes to policies, he works on how to influence City Hall and improve communication overall. He focuses some of his time on quantitative public opinion research; that is, informing the public about the decisions being made, as well as creating questions to ask to the public to get their input on those decisions.

7. How do you define “sustainability?”? 10:30 am

He replied this question by stating first that sustainability is a constant concept they keep in mind at BTA. In fact, one of the aspects of sustainability they take in count, mainly, is equity. He argued that there is a need for diversity, knowing how people coming from different backgrounds feel about certain issues related to sustainability and sustainable practices, and making sure that sustainability do not become a concept that is limited to such practices as recycling, or be limited to only those who can afford to live sustainably. He also added that, to him, sustainability equated future; that is, he worried about leaving our environment the same or better and making sure that the resources he had the opportunity to use were available to future generations. Coming back on the equity aspect, he underlined that, for example, the idea of homeless people living on the streets was not sustainable. He used this example to explain that people who cannot take care of their own needs or have problems

they need to deal with (i.e. asthma, autism, mental health) cannot think about sustainability in the same terms others can. To sum it up, he said that “We are lacking a strong social component here.”

8. How do you assess or gauge progress toward sustainability? 10:35 am

He agreed that this was a hard question, as it takes time to see if there is any worthwhile difference made and if sustainable practices were indeed implemented. However, he said that there was progress being made in the right direction, but that the progress was being slowed down because of representatives arguing a lot, rather than collaborating on the issues at hand.

9. I have watched the video you posted on the BlueOregon website, in which you said that you had a long record working on sustainability. To you, how does bicycling relate to sustainability?

10:45 am

As he had mentioned earlier during the interview, in the context of sustainability, he pointed out how bicycling met the equity aspect of sustainability: through biking, one may avoid getting sick, getting stuck in traffic, saving money that would otherwise be invested in a car (fuel, insurance...), and getting exercise. In his own words, by biking, we reduce greenhouse gas emission (environment), we save money on gas and car insurance (economy), and we get more in touch with our environment while getting exercise (social equity).

10. Still on the BlueOregon website, I read that “It’s one thing to want to be a leader on the environment or affordable housing. It’s another thing entirely to navigate multiple layers of government and business and to get your colleagues to agree with you.” As such, what kinds of policies related to biking have you helped implement? 10:50 am

Since he works as director of communication, he was not able to answer that question well. However, he told me that he helped on some works related to making bicycling a safer and more attractive means of transportation through several projects going on in BTA. Also, as of the date of this interview, Mr Middaugh had been involved in serious negotiations on some newer projects. Basically, those projects involved building pedestrians and biking infrastructures.

11. In your opinion, what should policies related to bicycling entail? 10:55 am

He made a big emphasis on the fact that all policies, even before implementation, need to be introduced to the public, which then decides whether or not the policy, as intended, is appropriate or not. He also pointed out that any policy designed around the idea of bicycling should entail making it more appealing. He gave examples such as decreasing the cost of bicycling. That applies to areas such as the bike itself, accessories, and even a policy that would give some sort of bonuses or credit to those who recognize that biking is a sustainable yet interesting way to move around and get to places when a car is not always needed.

12. How have you seen people respond to transportation policies related to cycling? 10:58 am

He agreed that this question was somewhat difficult in the aspect that there exist two types of people when it comes to biking. There are those who are passionate and positively embrace bicycling, and there are those who see bikes and bikers as another special interest/ special interest group. As such, responses to policies around bicycling have varied according to whether people belonged to one or the other type.

13. How have you designed policies as to make them easy to implement by the Portland community? 10:59 am

For this answer, he referred to what he had previously said about sustainability and what bicycling policies should entail, and added that how easy a policy is to implement depends on what type of people are being dealt with. All in all, he said that he basically appealed to some of the features he himself found when biking for the first time, which is that it was faster because one could avoid traffic, and added that, if more people practiced biking, congestion would be avoided. Basically, he used these ideas as arguments to make policies easier to implement.

14. In the case of implementation of those policies, how do you evaluate their efficiency? 11:00 am

He was brief here, but he said that it would be evaluated based on the answers he reported from the public through the quantitative public opinion research introduced earlier.

15. If you designed bicycling policies to make biking a more attractive option for people, would you make the design process participatory –meaning using the public’s opinion as you craft them- or engage only BTA personal with expertise in the field of policies? Why? 11:01 am

This question was somewhat skipped because he had already answered it in previous questions, but he still agreed that it is always a participatory process because, after all, the policies are made for the public.

16. In what ways have you found policies related to sustainability are hard or difficult to be accepted by the public? 11: 02 am

As far as he could remember, he hasn’t found that any one policy was met with hostility by the public, because, as he said, once people understood the benefits associated with biking, they were more likely to receive any policies related to biking positively.

17. From my studies on your background, I learned that you have experience “navigating multiple layers of government”. How have you done so with these policies we’re talking about?

This question ended up being not asked because he had somewhat thoroughly answered it through another question. Refer to question 4.

18. What works have been/are being done so far to make biking a safer and more accessible to the public? 11:03 am

He referred to previous questions to answer this one, reiterating that the main works being done or that have been done were in biking infrastructures. However, he added that such works were useless unless the people for whom they were being designed actually gained some interest in biking.

19. What are some of your proudest achievements? 11:05 am

For this one, he did not find any one achievement that stood out to him, since most of his work is regular work, so I ended up asking him this question from the perspective of his work with Metro

and/or working life in general. Then, he recounted one of his proudest achievements as participating in making McDonalds use alternate, non-chlorine bleached wrapper instead of the chlorine ones. He also talked about how he was able to get to have 30% of dollars put aside for housing. He also mentioned working with an organization dedicated to the protection of fishes.

20. What are some of your persistent challenges? 11:08 am

He listed government as one of his persistent challenges because it takes time and good persuasive skills to get them to agree on certain projects to be undertaken. He also added that another of his challenges was based around the fact that changes that need to be made are related to community investment strategies. In fact, one of his thoughts was that “ It takes a long time to get people to start thinking in terms of ‘all of us’ .” He agreed that, in many occasions in the past and even today, there were always hard choices to make.