

"Federation Corner" column
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European countries embrace multi-modal transportation

by Peggy Dennis
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Two things filled me with envy during my recent trip to Germany, Luxembourg and Switzerland: (1) power and utility lines are rarely above ground, and (2) governments long ago made commitments to multi-modal transportation that we would do well to emulate. These two features are related.

In all three countries we were impressed by the fact that every primary road we traveled had a well-engineered and well maintained pedestrian/bike path running beside it. The ped/bike paths are parallel and close to the roads so motorists coming out of driveways and cross streets can easily see all types of travelers. The paths follow the same grades as the roads, unlike so many of our "hiker/biker" paths which are set back 40 to 50 feet from the road and follow the natural contours of the land resulting in many more steep hills to discourage use by bicyclists.

The German bike/ped paths were also built with street trees planted either in the narrow strip between the road and the path, or close to the path on the side away from the road. These trees are now mature and they offer all travelers a beautiful, shady, green passage that is much cooler and more inviting for summer bicycling and walking than our hiker/biker paths. The paths are used by many local people--walkers and bikers--of all ages, even in the rural areas. They are sufficiently appealing to also be a draw for vacationers wanting to take bicycling holidays in the countryside.

I compare the German roadside paths to the hiker/biker path constructed along Seven Locks Road between River Road and the Beltway during the early 1980s. I circulated a petition in advance of the construction among my neighbors (my first attempt at civic activism) asking the State Highway Administration to spare more of the trees within the public right-of-way, so that the hiker/biker path would be shaded. Our petition was ignored and all trees were cleared from the wide right-of-way. To this day this stretch of Seven Locks Road is covered with thin, half-hearted grass which the county must mow at regular intervals. Visually, it's an ugly no-man's land, and the unshaded path is too hot during the summer to be a pleasant or inviting public asset.

We did a little better with trees planted more recently along the hiker/biker path at the western end of Falls Road. But the selection of trees there left much to be desired. The hollies and evergreens would never have grown up and over to shade the path, and the local deer have munched them into horribly misshapen forms anyway. The few deciduous trees were similarly unprotected and rarely watered, so most have died or struggle to merely survive. One must wonder why our county Department of Transportation planners cannot select better trees for our public paths, or why they do not plant, protect and water them well enough to get them off to a good start. A job poorly done, and without the necessary follow up, ends up wasting the taxpayers' money.

Back to the first point: power and utility lines. We rarely saw them anywhere in our travels. For many decades power lines in Europe have been routinely buried underground. The result? The Europeans rarely experience electrical outages. And the trees along their roads are permitted to grow up into their beautiful, natural forms without the kind of radical and bizarre pruning and topping that PEPCO (the Potomac Electric Power Company) and the Asplundh Company have perpetrated on our street trees. I think it's time our elected officials require PEPCO to start on a prioritized schedule of undergrounding. If we have to pay somewhat higher rates for our electricity, I think it would be well worth it.

Europeans in the cities we visited - Rostock, Luxembourg, Bern and Lucerne – routinely travel their streets less by car and more by buses and trams, by foot, by bicycle, by in-line skates, by scooters and skateboards. It's a rich and eclectic mix. Mail, for instance, is delivered via specially equipped bicycles. We rarely saw safety helmets, but motorists, cyclists and all the other forms of muscle-powered transport seem to go along slowly, carefully and considerably. Our 35-year old former foreign exchange son in Bern owns several bicycles for different purposes but no car. He uses the local equivalent of Zipcar when he must have an auto. McDonalds (yes, the fast food chain vilified in the movie "Supersize Me") is funding a low cost bike rental program in Bern. Naturally, we had to give that a try, and it is a winner! The bikes were great and easy to handle, the paperwork minimal, and the price unbeatable: the first three hours are free and after that you pay one Swiss franc per hour. [Note: D.C. already has BikeShare up and running – a very similar and very popular program]

Children are taught street and safety skills from a very early age. We saw bicycles for toddlers that have no peddles or brakes, but which allow even the tiniest tots to push themselves along by their feet and learn to keep their balance and mind what's going on around them before they graduate to regular two-wheelers. We watched for fifteen minutes as a local village policeman in Habkern, Switzerland took a group of 10 children through their paces in an on-the-road bike safety course as part of their school curriculum. Our "Safe Routes to School" is on the right track, but it needs to be expanded and included in every school to help us catch up with our European counterparts. And we have so much catching up to do!

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to theelms518@earthlink.net