

# Report of the WBC Expedition to New Orleans in Late 2006 (text only)

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Dan's note: I tried to make this report as thorough as possible to encourage other bike projects throughout the country and world to copy the actions described in the report by showing them in as much detail as possible what goes into successful bikes project like the ones we visited in New Orleans. I also wanted to make the experience as real as possible for all of the members of Working Bikes Co-operative (WBC) so that they become more emotionally involved in WBC's activities in New Orleans, and I wanted to set a positive example for future trip reports.

## 1. Summary and description of New Orleans as we found it

Hurricane Katrina entered the New Orleans area on August 29, 2005 and caused severe destruction. The wind and rain were bad enough, but most of the devastation was caused by multiple failures of the levee system, notably the 17<sup>th</sup> St Levee that flooded the lower 9<sup>th</sup> ward of the city of New Orleans.

In summary, the bicycle culture is extremely vibrant. Plan B has been working hard for at least 6 years and it shows. Bikes are everywhere and New Orleans is a great city for biking. Like Chicago, the largest hills are highway overpasses and New Orleans has the advantage in winter with milder weather. In our brief experience, automobile drivers seem to be a bit less cooperative than drivers in Chicago, but Liz Davey and the Metropolitan Bicycle Coalition are trying hard to change that.

Plan B has been our main partner organization for the distribution of approximately 900 bicycles in the past 18 months and in the future they plan on doing more bike education than mass bike distribution. RUBARB was spawned by a Common Ground volunteer center and the volunteers' use of bicycles, but as the Common Ground volunteer center may soon be closing, RUBARB's future remains uncertain. Director Liz Lichtman intends to remain open, independent of Common Ground, and the Upper and Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Wards could certainly use a community bike shop. The Metropolitan Bicycle Coalition of New Orleans has been compared to CBF, and they are working hard to improve bicycling conditions from the top down. They also support city bike projects. Other groups are interested in bicycle advocacy in the city, such as NENA. Louis Keller, a resident of the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward and regular volunteer at Plan B and RUBARB would also like to open a bike project.

I was able to secure some publicity for Working Bikes activities, appearing on the radio show This Is Hell. The show is broadcast from Northwestern University every Saturday morning. You can listen in Chicago on 89.3 FM or go online to [www.thisishell.net/archives](http://www.thisishell.net/archives). To listen to my segment, download or stream the 12/30/06 show and fast forward to roughly 3 hours into the show.

## 2. Plan B <http://www.bikeproject.org/>

John Gerken has been my principle contact with Plan B for the bike shipments that we have done so far. He played host for Steve Marsala and I. Along with his roommates and fellow Plan B volunteers Melody and Crystal, John lives in a loft space in the same building as the Plan B work shop. Thanks for all of the residents for letting us stay in their home.

Plan B currently pays \$800/month for their workshop space. Other tenants in the building include a library and various artist spaces.

The Plan B space does not have a tremendous amount of storage room, so many of their bikes are stored outside, partially covered by tarps, ala the Kedzie warehouse (see photo above on right).

The Plan B workshop is a lively place during open hours, which currently are Monday 2-6, Thursday 4-8, and Saturday 2-6. The shop is also open all day Tuesday, but for women and trans only. The sign on the door to Plan B reads:

## Welcome to Plan B

New Orleans Community Bicycle Project

How it works:

- We have tools, manuals, and resources such as grease, lube, and a pump, available for anyone to use at no cost. It's free.
- We do charge money for parts, patches and bikes when we have them. Please refer to the price list. All money goes to rent and supplies.
- Please ask for assistance or direction in finding things
- We do not offer services like a regular bike shop. You can not leave your bike here to be fixed. We do not build bikes on request. This space is for learning and sharing of skills and resources.
- Hey! You can volunteer! You can donate parts and bikes, money, or other needed stuff. Please inquire.

Their price list as of 12/30/06 is as follows:

Bikes – We Built 'Em: \$45-100

- You Built 'Em: \$25-75

Tires, Wheels, Seats, Cranks, Handlebars: \$3-10

Shifters, Brakes, Levers, Stems: \$2-5

Donations are rad! \*Typical Prices. Extra fancy stuff may run more.

Plan B currently has an active youth earn-a-bike program. Kids under the age of 16 participate in a 4-5 week class in which they overhaul the bike and put in some hours for Plan B before they receive their bike. Plans are being formulated for a similar class for adults.

### 3. RUBARB <http://rubarbike.org/>

RUBARB stands for Rusted Up Beyond All Recognition Bikes. It is a workshop that was developed out of necessity because of the widespread use of bicycles by Common Ground volunteers who lived and ate in the St. Mary of the Angels church next door. Liz Lichtman is the principal organizer of RUBARB, but she was not in town during our visit. Fortunately, another heavily involved volunteer, Otis, was there to show us around. The Common Ground center across the street may soon be closing, but Liz has plans to keep it open so that it can be an independent bike workshop for the local community (the Upper 9<sup>th</sup> Ward). Otis will soon be leaving New Orleans to return to college in New Hampshire.

Open shop hours are currently Monday 10-2, Wednesday 1-dark, and Saturday 1-dark.

The steps of RUBARB's earn-a-bike program are clearly defined:

1. Fix-a-flat

2. Take apart a wheel, clean the parts, put it back together
3. Overhaul the bike (take apart, clean, put back together)
4. Help beautify RUBARB (bike poetry! Paint! Sweep! Make bike art! Sculpt! Label wheels! Sort tubes! Sort parts! Clean up!)

#### 4. Metropolitan Bicycle Coalition of New Orleans [www.metrobicyclecoalition.org/](http://www.metrobicyclecoalition.org/)

The WBC expedition met with Metropolitan Bicycle Coalition (MBC) president Liz Davey on New Year's day. "The Metro Bicycle Coalition is a grassroots organization dedicated to improving commuting and recreational cycling conditions in and around New Orleans, Louisiana. MBC works to increase transportation choice, mobility, and infrastructure by establishing a safe network of bicycle lanes, paths and facilities, educating cyclists and drivers on safety and the rules of the road, and advocating at local, state and national levels for routine accommodation of bicyclists and pedestrians."

In November 2004, the MBC was able to get the city of New Orleans to set aside \$4 million from a Capital Improvements Bond for a network of bikeways throughout New Orleans. Due to the hurricane, this project has been delayed. MBC has been preparing by creating the first ever bike route map of New Orleans and supporting area bike projects. A recent project included the free distribution of 500 bicycle safety kits. The kits included:

- Battery-powered front and rear lights
- A patch kit
- A handout describing bicycle traffic laws

Two projects we discussed working on with the MBC are the establishment of a space to store bicycles so that groups like RUBARB and Plan B don't have to. The space could be a building or a shipping container. We also discussed a bicycle project for Tulane University, where Liz is the Sustainability Coordinator.

#### 5. Other Projects

- A. **Louis Keller** – Louis is a resident of the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward and is a regular volunteer with Plan B and RUBARB. He helped Jeff Eicholz with the kids bike giveaway in mid-December 2006 and expressed interest in starting up his own bike project. I was unable to get ahold of him when I was in New Orleans, but I have since spoken with him and he is in the process of completing the Working Bikes Partner Application for a shipment of bikes. He says he has secured space in a gutted house in the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward and wants to open up a bike project for the neighborhood. Look for more details from him very soon when he returns the application. Has donated bikes in the past but has learned that attaching a value to the bike is very important, otherwise the recipients treat them as throw-away items. When matching a bike to a recipient, he makes sure they know how to ride safely, he fits the bike to the rider appropriately, and he asks for a minimum of \$15.
- B. **NENA** – This acronym stands for Neighborhood Empowerment Network Association (<http://lower9thwardnena.com/>) and it is an organization based in the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward. In 2006 they did a bicycle give-away in partnership with Kansas City-based Bikes and Trikes for Tykes. At the present time, they have no particular bike expertise or focus, little storage space, and no bike mechanic to repair bikes. While I was in town, I spoke with Patricia Jones, the president of NENA, and Charles Allen, the vice president of NENA. NENA's volunteer coordinator is Linda Jackson. Patricia says they are expecting another shipment of bikes from Bikes and Trikes for Tykes in January 2007. They will also be distributing rebuilding materials this year. Related to this project is Gilbert Scie with the Greater Little Zion Baptist Church who may be able to supply some bicycle storage space on a temporary basis; and David Macaulay with Bikes and Trikes for Tykes and a group called Help Holy Cross ([www.helpholycross.org](http://www.helpholycross.org)). Bikes and Trikes for Tykes is an organization similar to Working Bikes and I think it's important to stay in communication

with them so that we can combine our efforts to maximize the positive effect on the bicycling community of New Orleans.

- C. **ACT** – This acronym stands for All Congregations Together and they worked with Working Bikes on Jeff Eicholz' kids bike giveaway in mid-December 2006. I did not get in touch with ACT's directory Mary while I was in New Orleans.

## **6. Conclusion**

Plan B is a mature and independent bike project. WBC should not expect any bicycle requests from them in the near future. We could possibly support them with shipments of parts, but for the time being we should maintain communication and admire their work. We could definitely learn from them if we should decide to open up Working Bikes' shop for community use.

RUBARB is in a transition phase. With WBC's support, it could become an independent bike project serving an area that could benefit from inexpensive bicycle-based transportation (the Upper 9<sup>th</sup> Ward).

The Metropolitan Bicycle Coalition is working hard to maximize the potential of the bicycles that WBC has shipped to New Orleans. With safer streets and more knowledgeable riders, the biking community in New Orleans can do nothing but grow. MBC may also present WBC with a shipping partner opportunity when Liz Davey is ready with the bike project for Tulane University.

Louis Keller seems to be on the verge of opening a new bike project that will be serving an area that definitely needs inexpensive transportation (the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward). WBC should expect a grant request from him shortly and I highly recommend that we approve it.

NENA appears to be well-served by Bikes and Trikes for Tykes, and at this time, ACT doesn't appear to be ready for a bike project. But both are groups that WBC could maintain contact with for future projects.

The New Orleans bicycle community is thriving. A network of free or low-cost bike projects are sprouting from the city center in the direction of the worst devastation from Hurricane Katrina. This is the result of a lot of hard work and everyone involved should be happy that their effort is successfully leading to the sustainable recuperation of a great city.

## **7. Car transportation information**

For those concerned about using a gasoline-fueled automobile to do bike advocacy, consider that our expedition minimized the consumption of oil-based fuel as much as possible. The 2050 mile trip was done in a 2003 Honda Civic Hybrid that achieved an average of 41 mpg for the trip. Taking the carpooling effect into consideration, the mpgp (miles per gallon x passengers) score of 164 is outstanding. No other light duty passenger vehicle could have done better. The gas mileage was slightly lower than usual for this car due to the relatively heavy load (4 people and their stuff) and high speed highway driving.