



BENJAMIN BRINK/THE OREGONIAN

Mia Birk turned her love of bicycling into a career that is changing how Portland and other cities accommodate bicycles.

The Monday Profile | Mia Birk

A key spoke in Portland's bike culture

By JEFF MAPES
THE OREGONIAN

When Mia Birk ran Portland's bicycle program a decade ago, she received a call from a helpful paving crew chief one Friday afternoon.

The crew would repave Southeast Seventh Avenue that weekend and the crew chief noticed from a city map that it was supposed to be a bikeway. So what should he do?

Birk, pleased that her schmoozing of city road crews had paid off, quickly got a traffic engineer to help her draw up a restriping plan that reduced the number of travel lanes to make room for bike lanes. Several business owners, surprised

to find a new streetscape when they arrived Monday morning, called the city to complain.

Birk made sure to call the business owners to apologize for the city's haste, but she wasn't sorry she had grabbed the opportunity to continue building what is now Portland's nationally recognized bike network.

"We had two mottoes that guided us in those days," she explained at a conference years later. "One was, go like hell until you can't go no more, and the other was, it was easier to ask for forgiveness than to ask for permission."

It was with such verve, smarts and speed that Birk, who

Please see **BIRK**, Page A6

METRO | NORTHWEST

THE OREGONIAN • MONDAY, AUGUST 6, 2007



Photos by BENJAMIN BRINK/THE OREGONIAN

Mia Birk begins her commute to work by taking her daughter, Sasha, to preschool and her son, Skyler, to a friend's house. Her firm, Alta Planning + Design, has offices in six cities, with the largest in Portland.

Birk: Return to help Portland bikers is 'pure joy'

Continued from Page One

came to Portland in 1993 as a 25-year-old idealist in love with bikes, built a career that put her at the forefront of an emerging movement to re-engineer cities to make them friendlier to walkers and bicyclists.

During Birk's six years as city bike coordinator, bikeway mileage climbed from about 60 miles to more than 200 miles, and ridership grew to the point that Portland became widely recognized as the most bike-friendly big city in the United States.

In 1999, Birk joined a two-person firm specializing in bicycle and pedestrian planning. Now Alta Planning + Design has 32 employees — including Birk and four other partners — in six cities and is one of the planning powerhouses of the bike and pedestrian world. Birk has traveled the country talking up the Portland story, and her firm is even starting to have an international influence. One of Alta's newest clients is Dubai, the wealthy Arab emirate that wants to build a bikeway network and is willing to consider such eye-catching amenities as an underwater bike tube.

Birk will be a prominent figure at the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy's national convention in Portland this week, appearing at several technical sessions. She will also host an Alta Planning party for attendees and will promote one of her latest causes: helping create the Initiative for Bicycle and Pedestrian Innovation at Portland State University.

"Her expertise and connections with the whole bike community locally and nationally is a huge asset for us," said Lynn Weigand, director of the new PSU program. Birk and other backers of the program hope it will eventually make Portland one of the top centers for bicycle and pedestrian research and education.

Birk quickly grows animated and the words flow when she talks about how the bicycle is an ideal form of urban transportation — and how it can improve the health and vitality of urban life. She has little patience for people who say cyclists needn't

be accommodated.

"My philosophy is, you treat the system how you want people to act," she says. "So we put in bike lanes because we want people to bicycle. If we don't want people to bicycle, we do nothing. I just think it's unreasonable to expect to take bicycles as a serious form of transportation if the city is unwilling to take them seriously."

A trim and youthful 39, Birk is a trim woman for the benefits of cycling. Though she owns a car, she rides frequently, both for recreation and to get around town.

One morning, she begins her day by getting 8-year-old son Skyler's bike out of the garage and hooking 5-year-old daughter Sasha's trail-a-bike onto her own Trek hybrid for the ride to a friend's house to drop off Skyler and then to preschool for Sasha.

"My minivan is when I put the trailer on the back," jokes Birk as she gestures to the bike trailer in her garage, which is a dense jumble of bikes.

Birk never gave much thought to bicycling while growing up in suburban Dallas. "We used to drive everywhere," she says. "We would get in our car and sit there for 10 minutes while the car idled and the air conditioning kicked in so we could cool off and drive, like, across the street to the grocery store."

Her thinking changed when she moved to Washington, D.C., to attend the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. The Dupont Circle campus was bereft of parking, so Birk started riding an old Schwinn one of her brothers loaned her. "Within a few

months, it all clicked in to me," she says. Bicycling could be an efficient form of exercise that didn't bore her.

In high school, "I was kind of chubby, just wasn't in shape," she says. "Just biking around for 20 years changed my physique."

Birk eventually worked on international transportation for a D.C. think tank but decided she didn't want to spend her career writing policy papers. After Congress passed a landmark bill in 1991 that directed more federal transportation money to bicycling and walking, Birk figured her dream job would be running a city bike program — in Portland.

Her timing was impeccable. Earl Blumenauer, then the city commissioner in charge of transportation, wanted to step up the city's bike program. And Birk seemed like the person who could do it.

Rob Burchfield, the city's chief traffic engineer, hired Birk and was her first boss. He calls her one of the most talented employees he's ever had.

"She wasn't particularly patient when she started," he says. "She wanted to do stuff quickly. I remember convincing her, 'Mia, we need to judge what we've done in a five- or 10-year period, not in the first 12-month period.'"

Birk originally thought she would focus her efforts on building trails and bikeways on low-traffic streets. But she found that the newly formed Bicycle Transportation Alliance and other bike activists didn't want cyclists to be shuffled off on trails and side streets that would not take them to the city's major destina-

tions.

Birk shifted her thinking from separation to integration, building bike lanes on as many of Portland's major arterials as she could. Portland became one of the first big cities in the country to build a large bike-lane network, and Birk says that's a major reason for the city's cycling boom. Surveys show that between 3 percent and 6 percent of trips in the city are now by bike.

Birk left the city in 1999 after the Office of Transportation dissolved the bike unit in favor of "mainstreaming" those duties among the entire staff. In a 2003 interview on KBOO Radio, Birk said she thought department officials "wanted to quiet down the profile of the bicycle program" because they worried that citizens thought that was all the department did. Birk now says she thought the "handwriting was on the wall" for the bike unit when Blumenauer moved on to Congress and the program lost its biggest political champion.

At Alta Planning, Birk brought trail advocates and the railroad industry together to produce an influential federal report exploring how to develop trails next to active rail lines. She is now an adviser to four communities — Minneapolis; Marin County, Calif.; Sheboygan, Wis.; and Columbia, Mo. — that received \$100 million in the latest federal transportation bill to figure out ways to shift trips to bicycle.

And Birk is back working with the city of Portland on an update of its master plan, now that bike advocates have a new champion — Commissioner Sam Adams, who heads the Office of Transportation. Adams campaigned for his commission seat promising to seek the highest designation given to a city by the League of American Bicyclists — the platinum award. Only Davis, Calif., has won platinum.

Birk calls it "pure joy" to get another crack at helping build the city's bike network. This time, she says, the plan will put more emphasis on building a web of low-traffic "bike boulevards" to attract riders who find cycling on busy streets — even with bike lanes — too scary.

"In essence," she says, "we've been involved in a grand social experiment, if you will, asking and answering the question, 'Can we transform and adapt a large, car-oriented city into one in which cycling is an integral part of daily life?'"

Jeff Mapes: 503-221-8209;
jeffmapes@news.oregonian.com

Mia Birk

Age: 39

Career: Principal, Alta Planning + Design. Also teaches bicycle and pedestrian planning at Portland State University. Was Portland's bicycle program manager 1993-99.

Family: Divorced; two children

Other interests: Active in Shir Tikvah Synagogue; tennis; guitar, reading

Little-known fact: She lives on one of Portland's official bike boulevards. When the city installed pavement markings along the bike boulevards, workers added a little yellow heart at the mark near her house (left).

