



Numbers count

More than 100,000 Australians will vote for bicycle transportation by riding to work on October 15, but unless they register, their endorsement of bike commuting won't count. Jess Goodear reports.

National Ride to Work Day will see Australians around the nation jumping on their bikes and waving the flag for bicycle commuting – and what better time than right now? All the issues surrounding ride to work – transportation, sustainability, health – are now at the top of the political agenda. But just as important as the commute itself, is registration, because registration equals numbers. And in politics, numbers count.

Bridging the gap

Evidence suggests there is an enormous gap between the number of people who ride to work in October and the number who register. In 2007, there were over 29,000 registrations but research suggests many more participated.

National Ride to Work Day is more than just thousands of bike riders riding to work on one day of the year, says Lucy Allinson, National Ride to Work Day Program Director. “Every registration for National Ride to Work Day is important in not only increasing this successful bike commuting program across the nation but also in identifying where support is needed most or where the greatest successes have been achieved.”

“The understanding gained from such mass registrations is critical to help guide planning authorities to best place their funding and infrastructure to increase the overall numbers of bike commuters in the medium and long term,” she explains.

Why collect data?

In the world of planning and development, data is integral: it is used to guide and assist decision-makers across all areas of infrastructure development. And numbers provide more than just a snapshot. They allow us to see changes and trends year by year and for this they need to be accurate and complete. The more accurate the numbers, the more meaningful they are in explaining trends.

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Numbers for government

All levels of government rely heavily on data in their strategic planning and evaluation of infrastructure development. Michael Langdon, Senior Advisor in Active Transport Planning for Queensland Transport, will use National Ride to Work Day figures as a secondary data source illustrating the origin and destination of Queensland's bike riders.

"It would allow us to demonstrate how the network is delivering the desired community and Government outcomes. It could guide prioritisation, investment and enhancement decisions, based on the number of people using the infrastructure and the changes that occur as new infrastructure is completed," he says.



An increase in the numbers of people riding in Brisbane over 20 years correlates to an increase in bike riding infrastructure.

Numbers for corporations

It's not just government decision-makers who look to commuting numbers for assistance with planning: "This year for the first time National Ride to Work Day will be making participation data available to corporations via the Bike Commuting Report," says Ms Allinson. "As more and more large national organisations take part in the event it is important for them to understand where they need to focus their efforts."

The Bike Commuting Report provides National Ride to Work Day data about each organisation's own participation numbers, average distances travelled, frequency of journey, modes of transport, and measures of sustained behaviour and carbon emissions. All registration information is confidential, so the report is only available to organisations with more than 40 participants.

Telstra is getting on board and will look to National Ride to Work Day numbers within their corporation to assist them in their decision-making. "Telstra will be using the National Ride to Work Day Bike Commuting Report to help understand our employees' interest in bike commuting," says Kristina Cockbill, Environmental Consultant and Co-ordinator of National Ride to Work Day within Telstra. "This

ride to work day 2009

information will help identify where to place our efforts and facilities, and to more efficiently target the needs and interests of our employees.”

David Moffatt, Telstra’s Group Managing Director of Consumer Marketing and Channels, supports the gathering of data from National Ride to Work Day as essential in identifying the needs of its employees in riding to work. “It’s important to collect data and we will be focused on understanding how many employees commute by bike on a regular basis within Telstra, and this helps determine facility requirements.”

Why register?

Geoff Rose, Associate Professor and Director of the Institute of Transport Studies at Monash University, is involved in designing the registration and evaluation components of Ride to Work Day. He says registration is critical for two reasons.

“Registration gives us another measure of the scale of this event, which is very important for putting cycling on the map and getting it on people’s – particularly political decision-makers’ – radars,” he says. “Whilst numbers are important, we also need to understand the ‘who’ dimension.”

The registration process and follow-up surveys are designed to help understand who’s involved in the event and how it’s influencing and impacting their riding habits. Mr Rose argues that when it comes to influencing decision-makers, this ‘who’ element is just as important as ‘how many’. “Registration helps to provide a better understanding of people who are commuting by bike and that provides very valuable information back to government decision-makers that can help with infrastructure and other decisions,” Mr Rose says.

Registration numbers = facilities = more riders

Because registration data is used to influence bike infrastructure policy and planning, it has the power to influence how the bike network is developed in the future. And a stronger



Riders at Federation Square, Melbourne
Image courtesy of Gavin Lombard

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bike network means even more riders, argues Jason den Hollander, Facilities and Development Manager at Bicycle Victoria. “There’s a very strong correlation between the strength of a network and the strength of rider numbers. What the registration data can do is help us plug the gaps in the network.”

Mr Den Hollander believes that registration goes deeper than just numbers and network development. Through the information gathered during registration, the Facilities Department of Bicycle Victoria can build an ongoing relationship with the bike riding community and have direct contact with those who register. “The data is the primary benefit – it’s great for reporting and showing trends and modal shifts,” he says. “But for us, the second, third and fourth communications are just as valuable. It’s the ongoing relationship with these riders which enables us to pick their brains and better understand what they are doing and what they want.”

Detail and accuracy is the key

The power of numbers is clear, but for data to be at its most useful, it must be both accurate and detailed. Both Mr Rose and Mr Den Hollander highlight that it’s the detail of National Ride to Work Day data (such as what motivates riders) that sets it apart from the rest. National Ride to Work Day numbers provide a valuable insight into the cycling community that other data methods, such as the Census, simply cannot.

“Many levels of government are still planning according to Census data, which is two years old and was recorded in the heart of winter,” Mr Den Hollander says. He points to information collected by counter loops that are permanently in place on off-road bike paths around Melbourne CBD, collecting data on bicycle traffic 24 hours a day. “The counter loop data tells us that during the year’s peak periods, November and March, rider numbers are between two and two-and-a-half times greater than during the Census.”

Super Tuesday is another method of data collection: once a year, Bicycle Victoria places hundreds of volunteers around Melbourne city during the morning peak commuter period to record the numbers of bike riders crossing key intersections. Mr Den Hollander says Super Tuesday counts are effective in providing information about where people are riding, what routes they are taking, which parts of the network matter and which parts are struggling, but this data alone is not enough.

ride to work day 2009



He points out: “All the different data methods in collaboration provide a better and bigger picture of what is happening in the bike riding world, than any one data source alone. If we are able to feed more accurate and more up-to-date data into the system, this will make a big difference. National Ride to Work registration data plays a big part in that.”

Mr Rose says it’s in riders’ best interests to register. “It gives us data on where people are riding to and from, what parts of the network people are using, their origins and destinations.”

Australia and beyond

Mr Rose explains how the event and the information it gathers is extremely valuable to bike riding around the world. “In the broader context of transport policy, this is something not just for Bicycle Victoria but something that, increasingly, governments in other cities and other states around the world are looking at as a potential mechanism to be able to encourage more cycling,” he says. “Therefore accurate numbers are very important.”

Help us help you

It seems everyone agrees that merely participating in National Ride to Work day is not enough. Registration is the key.

“People may feel that as they are riding to work on that day anyway, it doesn’t make any difference whether they are registered or not, but it means that we just don’t get that insight that we would if they were to register,” Mr Rose says. “Registration takes a few minutes to click a few buttons online. We’d like to see as many people as possible register ...”

Mr Den Hollander agrees. “The more people that we get registering, the more people can join a strong and committed voice to help with lobbying messages. If they’re not registered, they’re not being heard.”

Bicycle Victoria publishes all the information collected on National Ride to Work Day on its website, including:

- The **post event report**, which reports event numbers at each of the CBD and community breakfasts, as well as corporate and government involvement

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- The **follow-up survey**, which looks at behaviour change: new-rider numbers, how many have sustained the habit, why they took part and their feedback
- The **Carbon report**, which investigates the carbon savings achieved by National Ride to Work Day
- The **Media report**, which looks at National Ride to Work Day media coverage.

Workplace ambassadors and coordinators can also order their corporation's Bike Commuting Report at www.bv.com.au/join-in/30057/

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