

Taken for a ride

Walkways and cycleways are good enough for New York, LA, London and Paris. Here, the government's new transport policy means they have come to a screeching halt.

BY RUSSELL BROWN

It's a pleasant Thursday evening in central Auckland and a portable canopy outside the Aotea Centre is steadily filling up with bikes. Volunteers from Bike Auckland, the city's venerable cycle advocacy group, are running free "valet bike parking" for people arriving for tonight's event. It's a welcome service: the area around the Aotea Centre is a notorious blackspot for bike theft.

Inside, Janette Sadik-Khan, the former transport commissioner for New York City, will speak, and take a few questions from Helen Clark afterwards. Earlier in the day, Transport Minister Simeon Brown gave the keynote speech at the *New Zealand Herald's* "Project Auckland" luncheon.

Anyone who attended both events – surely there were a few – must have felt they were hearing dispatches from different worlds.

Brown talked up his government's proposed multibillion-dollar investments in a handful of big new roads and decried the previous regime's move to curb vehicle speeds on some streets. He used the word "speed" 23 times and promised "a transport system that boosts productivity and economic growth and allows New Zealanders to get to where they want to go, quickly and safely".

Sadik-Khan's speech was practised, witty, adroitly localised and studded with data. She said city streets were "not just ways to get from place to place, they're places in themselves". She declared, "One of the best ways to transform a city starts with a bike

lane," and quoted American urban design critic Lewis Mumford's famous 1955 declaration that "Building more roads to prevent congestion is like a fat man loosening his belt to prevent obesity."

Sadik-Khan now works for Bloomberg Associates, the philanthropic organisation founded by former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg, her boss when she was transport commissioner. She was brought here for the 2WalkandCycle conference sponsored by NZ Transport Agency Waka Kotahi and Wellington City Council after Wellington won a \$650,000 Bloomberg Initiative for Cycling Infrastructure grant. Her trip to Auckland was fostered by design hub The Urban Room and the Helen Clark Foundation. She praised the progress Auckland had made in reshaping itself since her last visit 10 years ago, illustrating her point with before-and-after photographs. She also gently acknowledged that progress towards the kind of city she was talking about faces significant headwinds.

It's hard to overemphasise how hard Brown's recent draft Government Policy

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Statement on Land Transport (Transport GPS) for the next 10 years turns against the ideas Sadik-Khan presented. It cuts half a billion dollars from the national public transport budget, but its rage is most squarely targeted at walking and cycling. The walking and cycling "activity class" has been cut by a third to a maximum of \$250 million for the year ahead, with \$70m-\$130m earmarked for subsequent years.

The screw is further turned in new conditions. The Transport GPS requires that "Investment in walking and cycling should only take place where there is either clear benefit for increasing economic growth or clear benefit for improving safety and



demonstrated volumes of pedestrians and cyclists already exist." Repairs to existing walking and cycling infrastructure can come only from the already-gutted walking and cycling budget and not be done as part of overall road maintenance. Waka Kotahi must now provide for walking and cycling along new roads only from that budget, too. On the face of it, it appears we'll be getting a lot of billion-dollar roads with no footpaths. It can't be said this was a surprise. Late last year, Brown ordered a halt to all walking and cycling plans that relied on funding from Labour's Climate Emergency Response Fund, which effectively comes from the Emissions Trading Scheme.

A plan including pedestrian crossings, widened footpaths, bike paths and raised crossings outside schools in Kerikeri was days away from signing and Far North District Council's transport spokesperson described the loss of funding as "devastating". A cycleway in New Plymouth was stranded ("clearly disappointing", said the council's chief executive) and a project to improve walking and cycling safety for school students and elderly residents in Ōamaru was scotched ("What is the government going to do to help Waitaki thrive?" lamented the mayor). All up, 40 local authorities had plans to build for walking and cycling with help from the "Transport

Janette Sadik-Khan, in black leather jacket, centre, at a Bike Auckland "Frocks on Bikes" event.

Choices" part of the climate emergency fund alone.

RETAIL BOOST

Sadik-Khan, who was New York's transport commissioner from 2007-13, offered a compelling story around the decision to reshape Times Square for people rather than cars. Business boomed, she said, to the point where the plaza has become one of the most bountiful retail precincts in the world. The first Manhattan street to get a protected

MATT GRAMFORD/BIKE AUCKLAND

Liveable cities



bike lane, the unlovely 8th Avenue, saw a 49% increase in retail sales – and a 58% fall in overall traffic accident injuries (the number of crashes involving pedestrians fell 67%).

New York City's cycling revolution has slowed somewhat since Sadik-Khan left her post. Annual pedestrian deaths have fallen to their lowest since the city embraced the Vision Zero philosophy a decade ago – and their lowest on record – but cycling deaths have bounced up again. Most bike fatalities happen at intersections and nearly all are on roads without cycling infrastructure. Current mayor Eric Adams has promised to double the number of intersection improvements to 2000 annually and half of those will be “daylighted” – an intervention that clears parking and other visual obstructions.

Meanwhile, Minneapolis has soared to the top of the large-city bikeability index published by US advocacy group People for Bikes. As well as expanding its network of protected lanes it has reduced the default speed limit on residential streets to 32km/h and larger arterials to 40km/h and installed raised crossings and other forms of traffic-calming. In 2022, Hennepin County, which encompasses the Minneapolis metro area and has a population slightly smaller than Auckland, recorded zero cycling fatalities.

Many smaller American cities do even better, but perhaps the most remarkable

story this year has been the comprehensive victory of the Measure HLA initiative in Los Angeles, a city regarded as the kingdom of the car. Electors voted two-to-one to force city authorities to implement a transport plan that had languished for a decade. Improvements on any street more than 200m long must now be multimodal – including bike lanes, bus lanes and footpaths.

It's essentially the opposite of our new Transport GPS, and it has equivalents in cities around the world, including unlikely centres such as Mexico City and Bogota. London's growing network of cycle super-highways, joined up by traffic-filtered streets and low-traffic neighbourhoods, has reached the point where there are more people on bikes at rush hour in the City of London than driving cars.

But perhaps nowhere is changing more rapidly than Paris under the mayoralty of Anne Hidalgo. Swathes of public space have

been reclaimed from motor vehicles, the city-wide speed limit has been cut to 30km/h, car-free areas declared outside schools and the number of cyclists on the streets doubled in the year to October 2023. Overall traffic crashes have fallen by 30% since 2014 and greenhouse emissions and other pollution have decreased.

MAJORITY SUPPORT

Developments in New Zealand have been less dramatic, but there is no doubt that more people use “active modes” – walking, cycling and micromobility vehicles such as e-scooters – to get places than was the case five years ago. Effectively, the lockdown-era boom in active modes has more or less been sustained nationally.

Waka Kotahi's most recent annual report on walking and cycling finds, unsurprisingly, that walking is the most popular active mode. But one in five of us cycle at least a few times a month and two cities, Christchurch and Tauranga, stand out for the proportion of the population that rides a bike to get places rather than simply for recreation, at 27% and 23% respectively. The most commonly-mentioned motivations for cycling were fitness, fun and saving money. The most commonly cited reasons for not riding a bike centre on safety: only a third of people feel safe riding on public roads



There are more people on bikes at rush hour in the City of London than driving cars.



5 Times Square in New York after pedestrian-friendly initiatives.

blog, the number of bike journeys logged by cycle counters in the city has grown by 30% since the counters were installed in 2017 – and by 50% on major central city routes. Where new paths are built, the routes they are on become much more popular.

In Wellington, cycling numbers around the Basin Reserve took off when the council opened the Kent Terrace cycleway last July and the count for February, at 10,908 journeys, mostly in commuting hours, was more than double what it was a year before.

Recent growth in Auckland has been less spectacular, although AT says it has built or upgraded 27km of shared paths and cycle lanes in the past two years. But this February saw the biggest bike month since measurements began, with more than 580,000 cycle movements clocked by counters at key sites, making for annual growth of 9.5% in the year to March.

“It’s not one transport mode over the other, it’s how do you provide options for all modes, for all types of people and needs.”

“The cycling numbers are surprisingly good,” says Tim Welch, director of the University of Auckland’s urban planning programme, “considering how little funding the mode receives from regional and national government, historical under-investment and the minimal reach of Auckland’s cycling network”.

The figures may also be a pointer to what works in the city. Since street improvements to Karangahape Rd were completed in 2021, bike journeys have increased significantly to 20,000 a month. The older Beach Rd protected bike lane on the eastern edge of the CBD attracts only 12,000.

“In comparison, K Rd serves a complete neighbourhood,” says Welch. “It’s full of shops, cafes, offices and residences. What brings people out on foot and bike are opportunities to do things in a cool neighbourhood. This is why every study of the local business impacts of cycleways – and bus lanes – shows that businesses are always better off with more cycling.”

“Many people are happy to cycle to a local business safely, and when they don’t have to worry about traffic or parking, they tend to engage in the activity more often. K Rd is a microcosm of this effect. There is more to do, it’s better to do it by bike or on foot, and the cycling numbers reflect that.”

Karangahape Road Business Association

with no bike lanes and 41% agreed with the statement that “I don’t feel safe because of how people drive” (the figure was 43% in Auckland; 37% in Christchurch).

Data reported on RNZ recently showed there have been more than 1900 crashes in Auckland involving a car and a pedestrian, cyclist or scooter rider since 2021. More than a third were in West Auckland, where, according to Waitākere ward councillor Shane Henderson, there has been no new bike infrastructure for a decade.

Half of us don’t currently have access to a bike. But two-thirds of urban New Zealanders, and even a majority of non-riders, supported investment in cycling infrastructure. That figure rose to 72% in Christchurch. A report on a “deliberative forum” held by Auckland Transport (AT) late last year, published at the request of the *Listener*, found similar sentiments: 65% of participants supported a citywide bike network, even where that meant parking loss, and that figure rose to 85% after more information was provided in the deliberative process.

According to the Cycling in Christchurch

CRASHES DOWN

Raised crossings and separate cycle lanes make it safer for everyone.

HAS THE BUILDING OF BIKE infrastructure made cycling safer? A recent peer-reviewed paper in the *New Zealand Medical Journal* tentatively concludes that it has, noting that while cycling numbers have increased, cycling crash injuries have stayed stable, suggesting “that the infrastructure spending by local councils and the transport agencies to build dedicated cycle lanes separated from cars and other vehicles may be successful in reducing cycling injuries”.

A paper published last year in the *Journal of Transport Safety* pointed to other factors, especially for walking. Pedestrian deaths and injuries in Auckland increased by an alarming 70% from 2014-17, prompting AT to commission an urgent review and then, in 2019, introduce its own version of Vision Zero, a strategy to eliminate traffic fatalities that began in Sweden.

One in five such crashes were taking place at standard pedestrian crossings,

so AT launched a project to build raised crossings. The authors compared data from standard crossings with 37 new raised crossings and found “the crashes at the improved sites have reduced from 20.8 to 5.6 crashes per year”. The authors highlighted a reduction in speed at the raised crossings.

Such safety treatments have been criticised by firefighters. But there’s no clear data to say that traffic calming is a major factor in fire crews missing response targets. It bears noting that after Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo converted the Rue de Rivoli, the main east-west artery on the Right Bank, to a walk-and-cycle space with a lane each for taxis and buses – against the objections of Paris’s firefighters union – fire response times fell below seven minutes for the first time in a decade. Perhaps the real problem is too many cars.

Paris’s Rue de Rivoli: Its conversion to give cyclists and walkers priority led to faster response times by fire crews.



general manager Jamey Holloway last year told *Metro* magazine the upgrade completed in 2021 meant “our Covid bounce-back has been quicker and better than most other parts of the city because the main impact of the cycleways is actually to make the street more enjoyable for pedestrians. It slows down the cars and provides a lot of extra space for outdoor dining. I would say the cyclists are the third or fourth beneficiaries of the cycleway on Karangahape Rd.”

K Rd is also well connected for riders: it links to the busy shared path alongside the Northwestern Motorway, to the looping pink Lightpath, Te Ara i Whiti, which leads to the Viaduct Basin, and to Grafton Bridge, which is closed to private cars during the week.

Not every project in Auckland has fared as well. Wrangling over the completion of cycle lanes on Devonport’s Lake Road has gone on for 15 years, since some motorists complained a first tranche installed in 2009 caused congestion. In the Mt Albert shopping strip on New North Rd, retailers lamented in 2018 that business slumped by a third after a project to revitalise the run-down centre did away with 33 car parks. Around the same time, a project aimed at slowing down traffic through West Lynn village in Grey Lynn, adding cycle lanes in the process, blew up into a war with the noisy intervention of a local anti-bike group.

Work on a westward connection from K Rd along the developing residential precinct of Great North Rd was halted by Mayor Wayne Brown in February after the government abolished the regional fuel tax. The minister responded by declaring he would legislate so remaining fuel tax receipts can be spent only on the government’s priorities for Auckland, not those of the council.

SAFER NEIGHBOURHOODS

Just as walking and cycling safety are difficult to separate from each other, both are also strongly linked to community and environmental aspirations, especially in the case of low-traffic neighbourhoods, or



With only 2% of Kiwis cycling to work ... it is important that investment in our roading network meets the needs of people who use it.

LTNs, where traffic is typically filtered to prevent streets being used as thoroughfares. A glimpse at the London Cycle Routes YouTube channel makes it clear how much of a role LTNs play in joining up dedicated cycleways and making local residential streets quieter and more pleasant.

When the last Labour government began its Reshaping Streets programme to make it easier for councils to do something similar in 2022, Simeon Brown launched a petition against the package, warning it could, among other things, allow councils to “repurpose streets as playgrounds for certain times”. The proposed rule changes were consulted on but have effectively been mowed down by the draft Transport GPS.

Christchurch didn't wait. City councillor Sara Templeton says about 12% of the city's cycling network so far is “what we call ‘neighbourhood greenway’ – slower streets with traffic calming and amenities like new garden beds and trees. While people on bikes share the road with vehicles, they feel safe. We've also used modal filters to change how intersections function on some of our cycleways – letting bikes through, but diverting cars to another road. They've been really useful for increasing safety.”

The city has also built more calming and slow-speed zones in recent years and although Templeton acknowledges “some pushback from those driving through”, she says “almost every time, we've done it because the local community have proactively asked for their street to be safer and cars to be slowed down”.

Templeton hopes Christchurch will be able to complete its cycling network – it's about two-thirds of the way towards a planned 101km of bike routes – but acknowledges most of the work has been done with the assistance of central government funding, which is now disappearing. That support began, ironically, with National's game-changing Urban Cycleways Fund under John Key.

In Auckland, the new transport policy appears to significantly undermine the council's Transport Emissions Reduction Pathway (Terp), which was unanimously approved by councillors. The plan calls for “supercharging walking and cycling”, but councillor Richard Hills says with the new GPS and the imminent cancellation of the Auckland regional fuel tax (which alone leaves a \$1.2 billion shortfall), “we won't have a lot of options. With little or no subsidy for these projects, we will not have the budget to do current planned projects let alone

introduce projects that fit the aspirations of Aucklanders.”

AT's head of active modes, Adrian Lord, says the organisation is waiting to see what the final GPS looks like before assessing its options. But he notes the agency has already begun a move to faster, cheaper projects that (unlike K Rd) don't involve major works in moving kerbs and renewing underground services. There's a focus on creating a network effect by joining up existing assets.

“The biggest barrier to cycling and walking reported by Aucklanders is safety,” says Lord, “particularly fear of traffic danger because of how people drive.”

Lord's boss, AT chief executive Dean Kimpton, attended Sadik-Khan's lecture and sat with her at the dinner afterwards.

There were “three key takeaways for me”, he says. “Being innovative, taking the community with you, and getting the balance right between modes. There are huge benefits to gain from trialling, learning and being innovative.”

“It's not one transport mode over the other, it's how do you provide options for all modes, for all types of people and needs. There are huge economic, social, and environmental gains when you get that balance right.”

BUMS ON (CAR) SEATS

In answer to submitted questions from the *Listener*, Minister Brown emphasised the GPS is still open to feedback and noted the upper limit of its walking and cycling budget for the next three years, at \$510m, is “a higher upper range than what the last government had in place under the 2021 GPS for the years 2024-2027.” But in a subsequent draft GPS, released just before last year's election, the Labour government proposed to spend a minimum of \$500m in 2024-2027.

Brown says value for money is a priority. “With only 2% of Kiwis cycling to work, compared to 73% commuting by either a private or commercial car, it is important that investment in our roading network meets

“**Future generations are begging us to make our streets safer, make the air cleaner and play our part in action on climate change. It shouldn't be controversial.**”

the needs of people who use it.”

By the same token, far more of us walk and the lower limit of the 2025-26 budget for walking and cycling combined is less than 1% of what NZTA is expected to spend overall.

Brown did not respond to whether he owned or used a bike, or to questions about the new rules forbidding multimodal infrastructure – such as the building of a shared path alongside Auckland's Northwestern Motorway as it was being upgraded – being built or maintained from overall road budgets, which has long been the practice. (The shared path had more than 40,000 bike journeys in February.)

We may already be seeing the implications of this change. Brown told the *NZ Herald* in February that the proposed second harbour crossing in Auckland would not provide for cycling. Having promised during last year's election campaign that a new Mt Victoria tunnel for Wellington would have “a much better walking and cycling connection through it” than the existing one, he recently refused to confirm that it would be possible to walk or ride through it at all.

KIDS LAST

Sadik-Khan called her book about the work of reclaiming public space *Street Fight*. Wellington's deputy mayor Laurie Foon says all of her councillors have been given the book “so we know the journey we're on and what we are trying to get to”. Templeton says it was the first book she read after being elected to council in Christchurch.

“I cannot comprehend why walking and cycling has become a political football in this city [Auckland],” says Hills. “People from all walks of life cycle and walk around our community. Most of those I see in my local community are kids, especially around school times, risking their lives just to get to school.”

“Imagine if we made it safer. How many more kids would be choosing these free modes of transport? Fewer parents dropping off their kids, freeing up the road for tradies, freight and those who have no choice but to drive. Why does this GPS make kids the victims of the culture war that we are seeing right now?”

“Future generations are begging us to make our streets safer, make the air cleaner and play our part in action on climate change. It shouldn't be controversial.”

But councillors do not control the national purse strings and it seems clear that, for the time being, New Zealand is, literally and figuratively, riding against the traffic. ■