

Representative Jim Oberstar is

Cycling's Best Friend in Washington



by Geof Koss

Congressman Jim Oberstar's affinity for cycling is obvious immediately upon entering his Capitol Hill office. Signed Trek and U.S. Postal Service racing banners adorn the reception area. Close by hangs a framed photo of the Minnesota Democrat with Lance Armstrong.

His inner office is also dotted with cycling memorabilia, including a snapshot of the trim, white-haired Oberstar leaning over the handlebars of a racing bike. "The Lance Armstrong of the House," proclaims the accompanying caption, while a nearby award from a cycling group lauds Oberstar as the "Bicycle Advocate of the Millennium."

"Overblown," he says of the praise, but both phrases are apt descriptions of the 75-year-old Oberstar. Like Armstrong, the 18-term congressman has a powerful personal connection to cycling that is related to a cancer diagnoses. And,

despite his modesty, as a long-time leading Democrat on transportation matters — not to mention his current chairmanship of the powerful House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee — it's arguable that no other government official has done as much to promote cycling as both a practical mode of transportation and a healthy lifestyle choice.

Oberstar cycled as a kid growing up in Minnesota, but it wasn't until his late wife



Jo was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1983 that bicycles reentered his life. The two began pedaling around their neighborhood in the evenings after a doctor friend recommended cycling as a low-impact activity to help her recover from chemotherapy. Jo succumbed to the disease eight years after her diagnosis, but Oberstar credits cycling for helping her win a two-and-a-half year respite from the cancer.

After her death, he too found relief in cycling. "I looked up in the garage, and there was the bike hanging, and I thought, you know, maybe I'll take a ride, that's what I need," Oberstar recalled in a recent interview. "And I got on it, I did five miles, and I felt good. The next day I went out and did 10 miles. The next day, I did 15." He rode 500 miles over the next two

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months. "And I was feeling better," he said.

Cycling has been part of his daily routine ever since. An assiduous recorder of miles traveled, he's averaged about 2,000 miles a year for the past decade, despite his hectic congressional schedule. "You just make the time," he said. Even hip replacement surgery in early 2008 couldn't keep him from his indoor trainer. "Nine days after the hip replacement, I was back on my bike," he recalled. "In six weeks, I was

outside."

Similarly he turned to his bike to recover from a 2007 spinal operation to correct lingering injuries from a nasty 1987 encounter with a car. That accident, which sent him over his handlebars and into the car's windshield at 20 miles per hour, was caused when an illegally parked driver pulled out in front of him. It took Oberstar five months of traction to regain feeling in his fingers and toes, but he was soon back on his bike rebuilding his strength.

Oberstar's devotion to cycling extends beyond his personal training regimen. Before she died, Jo told her husband she wanted some good to come of her fight. Oberstar, who had already fought for years to boost federal funds for cancer research, saw an opening for a new cause when Congress began writing a new "highway" bill in 1991. As negotiations on the bill proceeded, he became determined to inject a new emphasis on cycling into the federal transportation mix.

"One of the messages that came through clearly was that people wanted more out of their driving experience than just where the road takes them. Bicycling was an activity that I thought would fit into this new post-interstate era of transportation and would be a fitting memorial to Jo," Oberstar said.

But first he had some advice for the loose-knit coalition of bicycle advocates he met with to fight for federal highway dollars — get organized. "There's a huge road lobby out there that will eat our lunch," he told them.

His words were taken to heart, and the resulting bill, the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA), signed into law later that year, was the first federal highway bill to provide new and dedicated funding sources

for nonmotorized travel. In addition to providing funds for new trail construction, the law required states to have their own federally funded bicycling/pedestrian coordinators and to consider the needs of cyclists when creating their statewide transportation plans.

Oberstar credits the law with boosting federal spending on cycling to \$750 million over a four-year period — a far cry from the \$40 million he said states had spent on bicycle-related facilities in the previous 20 years. The ISTEA programs were continued in subsequent transportation bills, which are essentially multiyear blueprints that map out federal transportation policy. The 2005 highway bill saw the addition of a new Safe Routes to School program, intended to encourage children to walk or bike to school, as well as the Nonmotorized Transportation Pilot Program, which funds community studies on methods for increasing the use of non-motorized travel.

All told, Oberstar estimates that \$3.5 billion has been invested in cycling since 1991, resulting in 35,000 lane miles for bicycles. "It really transformed the transportation landscape of America," he said.

He's looking to the next transportation bill to build on that success. A draft of the Surface Transportation Authorization Act of 2009 released last year would consolidate existing federal cycling programs into an Office of Livability within the Federal Highway Administration, for which Oberstar wants a national bicycling coordinator position established to connect the disparate state cycling programs into a single clearinghouse.

Significantly, the bill would implement a U.S. Bicycle Route System, while encouraging states and municipalities to adopt



Three's company. Gary Sjoquist, Jim Sayer, and Congressman Oberstar out for a ride.

"complete streets" principles intended to make streets safe for nonmotorized users. It would also take steps to establish cyclists as "intended users" of streets, which would allow them more rights in bike-related court proceedings.

With a Democratic ally occupying the White House, winning administration approval for the policies in the six-year transportation bill shouldn't be a problem for Oberstar. However, the bill remains stalled due to a disagreement over timing. The Obama administration wants to put off debate on the measure until 2011, in part to delay the thorny question of how to pay for its expected \$500 billion price tag. Oberstar is adamant about doing it sooner. As negotiations over the matter continue, the 2005 law, which expired last year, continues to guide the federal trans-

portation policy under a series of short-term extensions approved by Congress.

When all is said and done, the final bill is likely to emerge from Congress with Oberstar's cycling provisions largely intact — a testament to what he calls growing support among lawmakers for cycling. Roughly 300 House lawmakers sought funding for bicycle trails during the negotiations that produced the 2005 highway bill, said Oberstar, who noted that many of those members are now proud of the resulting bike trails in their districts.

"That is a tremendous change from 17 years ago," he said. **AC**

Geof Koss writes about environmental issues for Congress Now. In the January 2009 issue, we published his story "The Last Ride of Frank Lenz." Look for a similar story in the May 2010 issue covering Thomas Stevens, another legend of early bike travel.

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