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## For Congressman, Life in Bike Lane Comes Naturally

**Earl Blumenauer of Oregon  
Rides to the White House;  
Look Out for Motorcades**

By **GREG HITT**  
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WASHINGTON -- A little after 6:00 one morning, Earl Blumenauer emerged from his Capitol Hill row house. The temperature hovered near 40 degrees and it was really raining. The Oregon congressman hopped on his rust-colored Trek Portland, an aluminum-frame bicycle with a carbon front fork designed to absorb road shock, and pedaled to his office.

Though he was alone on the road, and despite the downpour, he stopped at every red traffic signal. At one odd-shaped intersection, Mr. Blumenauer mused aloud about all the streets jutting off at odd angles. Perfect for a traffic circle, he suggested.

Later that morning, House Minority Leader John Boehner, the Ohio Republican, was incredulous that anyone had been out in such weather. "Are you out of your mind?" he asked.


Some members of Congress come to Washington and get in the fast lane. The 59-year-old Mr. Blumenauer came to Washington and got in the bike lane. Few members of Congress care more than he does about cranks and sprockets.

Mr. Blumenauer's "obsession with bicycling borders on the interesting," sniffed TV satirist Stephen Colbert.

"Bikeman," a House colleague from Oregon calls him. Mr. Blumenauer owns seven bikes. His congressional office is one of the few -- if not the only one -- that didn't even apply for a parking permit. On occasion, Mr. Blumenauer has cycled to the White House. On Mr. Blumenauer's first visit, the Secret Service, more accustomed to limousines, was flummoxed at the sight of his bike.

"I leaned it up against the portico," Mr. Blumenauer says.

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**Earl Blumenauer**



Rep. Earl Blumenauer of Oregon is a cycling fanatic who rides one of his seven bikes to his Capitol Hill office everyday. The WSJ's Greg Hitt reports on the congressman's efforts to promote bicycle commuting.

Washington isn't particularly bicycle friendly. The summers are swampy. The winters are cold. And if you aren't careful, you could get flattened by a motorcade.

But Mr. Blumenauer has been a pedal pusher since his days on the Portland City Council, when he pressed for more bike lanes and set an example by riding around in his suit and a big bow tie. When Mr. Blumenauer arrived in Washington in 1996, he didn't bring a car. Soon he was preaching the benefits of pedaling.

He launched the Congressional Bike Caucus, a bipartisan group that promotes public investment in cycling. In his early days, he tracked down Speaker Newt Gingrich in the House gym to pitch transit-fare subsidies for House workers. He got them. As the ranks of the Bicycle Caucus have grown -- there are now more than 170 members -- money for bike projects has grown, more than doubling during his time in office.

So, too, has Mr. Blumenauer's reputation: He's a Pacific Northwest liberal, labor and eco-friendly, with an earnest demeanor. He broke his foot in early 2006, tripping as he took out the trash for recycling at his home in Portland. "It could not have been more politically correct," says Kerry Tymchuk, state director for Oregon Sen. Gordon Smith, a Republican. For several weeks afterward, Mr. Blumenauer, on crutches, stayed off his bike.

At a community fund-raiser last winter, Washington Rep. Brian Baird, a Democrat representing a district across the Columbia River from Portland, spoofed Mr. Blumenauer and Portland's liberal sensibilities. In a dead-on parody of President Bush, Mr. Baird confused the word "bicycle" with "bisexual."

"Maybe they do things different out there in Oregon than we do in Texas," Mr. Baird said with a Bush twang.

Mr. Blumenauer's bike, a Trek Portland, leans up against the wall in his Washington office. Trek makes two bikes named for urban places -- the other is the Trek Soho -- and Mr. Blumenauer likes the idea that he represents one of them. "Really slick," he says. "How do I not buy that?" Actually, Mr. Blumenauer bought two -- one for Washington and one to keep at home.

On his way out of Rayburn House Office Building, Mr. Blumenauer pushed open the door with one hand and dragged his bike through with the other. He exited among soaring columns and onto a horseshoe-shaped drive, where 11 cars lined up along the curb. Many more were parked tightly on the street beyond.

Mr. Blumenauer swung his leg over the Trek and pedaled off, a blue messenger bag slung around his neck, crumpling the collar of his blazer. A reflector strap was tied around his pant leg. He turned right at the bottom of the drive, avoiding Independence Avenue, choosing instead a more circuitous but less congested route.

As he approached a metal guard gate, a Capitol policeman called out, "Getting your exercise, Sir?"

He passed several Greenpeace activists tromping around in whale suits near the Supreme Court.

A few blocks beyond, he pulled up at the Dirksen Senate Office Building, where Democrats were meeting to talk election-year strategy. He was there to give a presentation on online town halls. He looked around for a bike rack. With none in sight, he grabbed the heavy-duty U-lock slung over his handlebars and secured the bike to a street sign: Authorized Permit Parking Only.

With Democrats in the majority for the first time since he came to Washington, Mr. Blumenauer snagged a seat on the Ways and Means Committee, and has had some success peddling a proposal to encourage bike commuting. The tax code already encourages employers to subsidize parking spots for workers who drive or fare cards for those who use mass transit. But it is silent on bikes.

"You can't provide a benefit for people who burn calories instead of petroleum," says Mr. Blumenauer, in disbelief. "It just seemed outrageous that somebody who cycles got zip."

The provision would encourage employers to provide fringe benefits to bicycle commuters -- such as for repairs and annual upkeep -- at a cost to American taxpayers of \$1 million a year.

Mr. Blumenauer found a home for the proposal in the massive energy bill crafted by Democratic leaders in the House over the summer. When the measure first hit the floor, Republican critics derided it as an attempt "to tell the American people, stop driving, ride a bike," as Rep. Patrick McHenry of North Carolina put it. The measure was later dropped, and has a ways to go before becoming law.

"I'm not anticar," Mr. Blumenauer says. In a pinch, he will take a cab. And back in Portland, he and his wife drive a Toyota Highlander Hybrid.

In his more than 10 years in Congress, Mr. Blumenauer says he has saved tens of thousands of dollars by not driving, money that helped pay for the townhouse he bought. And when he cycles across town to an event, he often gets there faster than his friends in Congress do.

During his rainy ride to the Capitol, Mr. Blumenauer was unfazed by the wind and the damp. He wore running shorts and a black pullover, and planned to change into work clothes at the office. He pulled up to the garage at the back of the Rayburn building at about 6:30. A heavily bundled police officer waved him in. Late that night, action on the House floor kept the congressman from making a trip across town to the Four Seasons Hotel in Georgetown. He stayed instead in the Capitol. After votes, he led an hour-long debate on energy policy and global warming. One important solution: bikes, he says.

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