

The Supermarket Challenge, 24th February 2006, by Steven Muir



Two preschoolers and a weeks worth of groceries - how do you transport them all home from the supermarket? Steven Muir and his team have proven beyond doubt that the fastest, most enjoyable, cost effective, and environmentally friendly manner is to take a bike with a home made trailer towed behind. The event was held to promote a make-your-own bike trailer workshop being held on the 4th March 2006. The supermarket challenge had six participants, three on bikes and three in cars. They left from the Cathedral Square at 4pm and set out in pairs (one bike and one car), one pair went to Pac'n'Save (Moorhouse Ave), another pair to Merivale Fresh Choice, and another to Countdown Colombo Street. Each bike had one child on a front bar seat and one on a rear seat and towed a bike trailer behind for the groceries. The riders were all average commuter cyclists, both male and female, including a teacher, an occupational therapist/housewife and a horticulturalist. Steven had constructed two of the trailers and another had been made at a workshop he had run in 2005. The average cost of making a trailer was around \$10 using recycled metal beds, office dividers and bike parts, and (if well constructed) can carry remarkably heavy loads (up to 100kg). At that price the trailer is comparable to the petrol used in just one or two trips to the supermarket in a car.

The results surprised everybody when the bikes consistently returned ahead of the cars. Even over the short distance (1 km) to Pac'n'Save the bike achieved a five minute lead over the car getting to the supermarket, and a staggering 21 minute lead returning to the Square. This was not helped by a checkout computer crashing as the car driver went to pay for their groceries, resulting in around seven minutes being lost, but still it was an impressive difference. The Colombo Street Countdown (3 km from the Square) was the closest contest time-wise with the car and bike arriving at exactly the same times, but the bike managed to return two minutes ahead. The bike arrived at the Merivale Fresh Choice (3 km from the Square) eight minutes ahead of the car (due to Papanui road traffic) and kept that lead all the way, returning to the Square eight minutes ahead. The total times taken ranged from 27-48 minutes (note the groceries had been preloaded into a trolley in the supermarket, and the riders/drivers simply had to swap an empty trolley for the full one at the icecream freezer).

Other measures of success also consistently favoured the bikes. When asked how they enjoyed the journey the riders all reported having a great ride (five out of five), the kids loved being on the bike, they had brief chats with passers by and received admiring looks. They enjoyed the sunny warm day and getting some exercise and the traffic was not too much bother. Even having to brake, to avoid being cut off by a bus pulling in, didn't deter one cyclist who is quite used to dealing with such incidents. The drivers on the other hand all reported a fairly stressful journey (zero out of five) with kids getting hot and crabby in the car, and traffic congestion becoming irritating.

The consistency of the icecream was checked on return and found to be runnier in the warmth of the cars than on the bikes (although the best result was a mini chillybin in one trailer which did give a distinct advantage). No eggs were broken or peaches bruised by either car or bike. The cars all used 6-7 plastic bags, whereas two of the bikes used no bags whatsoever, loading the groceries directly into their removable trailer bins at the checkout. This gave an additional time advantage when transferring groceries into their trailer as well as the environmental advantage of reducing plastic waste. While cars could theoretically use this approach as well, they tend to resort to bags as the default option, whereas with a bike it is more natural to use the bins.

The heaviest load on a bike was 43kg of food, and 34 kg of children (total 77kg), which was carried from the Colombo Street Countdown, involving going over the Colombo Street Overbridge. Even at this load the rider had no problems, simply changing down a couple of gears to cope with the hill. The full list of groceries is available on the website www.cyclingchurch.org.nz and represented a reasonable weeks worth of groceries for a family.

A number of people had raised the issue of safety before the event, referring to the danger of children being hurt if a cycling accident occurred. Steven responded by pointing out that a far more dangerous thing than cycling down a busy road, is to sit at home (or in the car) doing nothing. Lack of exercise claims the lives of 2-3000 New Zealanders every year, compared to around six or seven deaths from cycling accidents. There is a risk of having an accident on a bike, but the riders in the challenge agreed that the perceived risk many people have about cycling, is completely out of proportion to other risks that occur in life, and the safest thing a parent can do for their child is to model and encourage an active lifestyle. Rainer, who cycled to the Colombo St Countdown, is an Austrian who cycled as a courier in Vienna many years ago. He suggested New Zealanders are addicted to their cars and need to 'harden up' and become more motivated to cycle. He had special chains fitted to his bike in Vienna so he could continue to cycle in the snow all winter, which he says would be beyond most Kiwi's comfort tolerance.

If you'd like to take part in the make-your-own bike trailer workshop 10am – 4pm on Saturday 4th March please email thepope@cyclingchurch.org.nz or look at the flyer www.cyclingchurch.org.nz/trailer.pdf. Steven has also written a very humorous book called PROSACC- Profound Revelations of Sunday Afternoon Cycling Church. Details are available on the website, or purchase it from Manna Bookshop. It is well worth a read.



Cyclists preparing to leave from Cathedral Square (note one sleepy passenger)



Loading food directly into bins at the checkout saves time and plastic bags



Rainer about to experience the overbridge with 77 kg extra load



Ed passing the town hall



Catherine heading down Colombo St.



Weighing the goods on return