

December 8th, 2008

Attention: Committee on Transportation/Committee on Consumer Affairs

Councilmembers, thank you for inviting me to testify about this important initiative to improve bicycle access and storage in buildings. My name is Sabrina Lau, and I work as an urban planner in an office at Broadway and Houston.

When I was hired, the first question I asked was not about my 401K or health care plan, but, "does the building have secure bicycle parking?" As an avid cyclist in Berlin and Toronto, I was well aware of NYC's record on bicycle theft and well acquainted with the convenience of having a safe, dry place to store your bicycle at home and at work. The answer was a sympathetic negative; however, other office cyclists had recently started a petition to lobby the building's owner for a change in bicycle policy.

Currently, bicycles are banned from entering the building; however, strollers and dogs are freely permitted. The explanation was that bicycles would cause damage to the elevators and hallways, and could not even be brought upstairs in the freight elevator for storage in individual offices.

My colleagues and I knocked on every door of our eight-story building, and asked the tenant if they would be interested in signing a petition to allow bicycle access. The response was overwhelming; people were knocking over their chairs in their rush to grab our letter and give it to their company head. We heard stories of bike theft and vandalism, offers of help and testimonials, stories of potential bicycle commuters that cited bicycle storage as their limiting factor, and stories of potential lease-holders that backed out at the lack of bicycle storage in the building. The emotion and enthusiasm we encountered was infectious, and we eventually submitted a letter outlining the sound business and environmental rationale for providing secure bicycle parking. In the entire building, we found only one dissenter; this letter was signed by the heads of 41 tenants in the building, including the 3 largest tenants and the large ground-floor retail anchors.

In January of this year, we received a response from the building owners stating, "in the best interests of the physicality of the building and the continued safety of the tenancy, we remain committed to the prohibition of bicycles...allowing the bicycles into the property would have negative impacts on our insurance rates on both the property damage, as well as, liability sides."

We continued to propose new solutions or compromises to address our building owner's concerns. Bikes cause no more wear and tear than the strollers or large dogs that use the same hallways. The legal counsel for Transportation Alternatives spoke with our building owners regarding their misinformation on their insurance rates. We provided examples of other buildings in NYC that successfully implemented bicycle storage facilities. We showed them letters written by the DOT commissioner and the president of the Real Estate Board of New York, extolling the virtues of voluntary compliance. In each and every instance, we were told, "we will never allow bicycles inside our building, unless required to by law."

And that is why I am here today. Councilmembers, commuter cycling should not continue to be viewed as a marginal, renegade activity. It is the most convenient, healthy, and environmentally-friendly way to travel around the city. Examples in Europe and Asia have shown it can be equally accessible to all ages, income levels, and backgrounds. At a time when our roads are horribly congested with vehicles, and our transit system is overburdened and underfunded, commuter cycling must become a viable option to a much greater portion of the population. Such regressive policies such as the one my building has towards bicycles must be changed. My struggles with my building owner have shown that voluntary compliance will not be sufficient.

Thank you,
Sabrina Lau