

BICYCLE EMPOWERMENT

BICI CENTRO BUILDS SANTA BARBARA'S BICYCLE CULTURE

BY BEN PRESTON



The bicycle collective Bici Centro offers inexpensive parts, expertise, and a welcoming environment to people who don't know much about the two-wheeled transports.

Santa Barbara is a community with a significant number of bicycle commuters and enthusiasts. On any given day, a variety of cyclists can be seen cruising up and down the community's many bike lanes. From neon spandex-clad athletes speeding by on the latest in biking technology to budget-minded commuters who are happy to get from point A to point B without incurring the high price of fuel, Santa Barbara plays host to all kinds of two-wheeled travelers. Some — including the pro-bicycle activists at the Santa Barbara Bicycle Coalition — would argue that bicycles should be a larger slice of our transportation pie graph. That sentiment was shared by enough people to facilitate the opening of Santa Barbara's first bicycle collective. Located at La Casa de la Raza Community Center on the East Side, the aptly named Bici Centro (if your knowledge of Spanish is *really* limited, that means Bike Center) brings inexpensive parts, expertise, and a welcoming environment to people who might not otherwise know much about bicycles.

Since the inception of the first "safety bicycle" — the two-wheeled, rear chain-drive variant used today — in 1885, there has been an ebb and flow in the popularity of the bicycle, usually in sync with economic health. After an initial bicycle craze during the 1890s, the advent of the automobile caused it to become relegated mainly to recreational uses. Brief spikes in popularity were seen during the Great Depression and during other times of economic downturn, such as the fuel shortage of the 1970s. It stands to reason that today bicycles are increasing in popularity as a serious means of transport, especially due to the related pressures of \$4-per-gallon fuel and acute concern about global warming caused by excessive greenhouse gas emissions. "Arguably, the most important thing you can do to reduce your carbon footprint is to ride a bike instead of drive a car," said Ed France, a 2005 graduate of UCSB's Environmental Studies program who is Bici Centro's lead mechanic, and essentially

the program's director. "Right now, about 4 percent of Santa Barbarians ride bikes. People at Bici Centro would like to see that number double."

France started Bici Centro as a once-a-month open bike repair shop in a back room at La Casa de la Raza, but this past December, he signed an agreement with the Santa Bar-

**'ARGUABLY, THE MOST
IMPORTANT THING YOU
CAN DO TO REDUCE YOUR
CARBON FOOTPRINT IS TO
RIDE A BIKE INSTEAD
OF DRIVE A CAR.'**

— ED FRANCE

bara Bicycle Coalition to bolster the program's educational outreach capabilities. Now, adult and youth bicycle repair classes are open to the public, as well as volunteer-assisted open shop hours on Thursdays and Saturdays. By reaching out to the community, Bici Centro attempts to get people more interested and involved in cycling by offering bicycle resources to those who might not otherwise have them, giving those folks the empowerment to fix their own bicycles.

With a huge and growing collection of donated scrap



THE DAGNE

A SUSTAINABLE PROTOTYPE FROM GOLETA

BY KELLIE RAGUSANO

Multimode Technologies President/CEO Ben Werner (left) and Chief Engineer Eric Sandoz show off an inner view of their three-wheeled electric hybrid, Dagne.



PAUL WELLMAN

AS I drove up to Eric Sandoz's home in Goleta, I saw the naked prototype of what will eventually become the Dagne waiting for me in the driveway. The three-wheeled Dagne is an electric commuter car that can do 120 mph. In conceptual drawings, it looks like it arrived from the future. Sandoz and Ben Werner, the founders of Multimode Technologies in Goleta, are creating the Dagne to rescue us all from unpleasant traffic conditions, horrifying gas prices, and a rapidly depleting planet.

Just before I got to his house, Werner was physically pushing Sandoz, who was sitting in the driver's seat, down the street in the prototype to test out the braking and steering. The Dagne is still in the "mule" phase, meaning that her mechanical parts are still being tested. But Werner and Sandoz recently gave the Dagne her first successful test drive. They are now hoping for investors to contribute the next \$1.8 million they will require to launch the next prototype.

The Dagne's prototype design, while futuristic, still somehow manages to resemble a go-cart, but that will change when the car has its doors and windows added. A joystick, reminiscent of a video game controller, controls the Dagne's steering and braking. "The joystick is more intuitive than the wheel of a regular car," Werner said.

Due to the simplicity of its electric drive system, the Dagne can sell for less than \$20,000, and it can run as either a pure electric vehicle or as a hybrid. Four gallons of gas or biodiesel would pull about 600 miles. It will require little of the usual car maintenance. There are a few competitors who also have three-wheeled electric car prototypes, but none is expected to be as inexpensive as the Dagne. One of them, the Tango, is being priced at around \$108,000.

The Dagne is named after the heroine in Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. Rand's protagonist, whose name translates from Scandinavian as "new day," is on a quest that resonates with Werner and Sandoz. The character struggles to reconcile personal self-interest with the greater good of the community and discovers that a path exists for each of us that serves both.

When I asked if they were concerned about intervention from big car manufacturers, Sandoz teasingly asked me, "You've seen *Who Killed the Electric Car?* haven't you?" Guilty as charged. Chris Paine's 2006 documentary explores the role of automobile

manufacturers, the oil industry, and the U.S. government in the limiting and sabotaging of electric vehicle technology. Werner responded, "If anything, there has been a huge backlash against the big car companies because of the way they killed the electric car in the '90s."

He said that, in light of the tidal wave of environmental awareness that has risen in the last few years, "There is a feverish desire for a vehicle that is sustainable and doesn't require people to pay \$4 a gallon for gas."

"Sustainability should be fun," in Werner's opinion, but that does not mean the Dagne is a toy: It's designed to be a seriously freeway-worthy automobile. Werner, who has a masters degree in electrical engineering from UCSB, even hopes that people "will want to replace the family car with the Dagne." A two-seater seems a bit small if the family's made of more than two, even with the trunk that Werner and Sandoz plan to install for groceries, soccer balls, and the various other things families carry around.

It's easy to imagine using the Dagne for errands, commuting, or even road trips, but wouldn't a three-wheeled vehicle roll over more easily than a four-wheeler? "Every vehicle can roll over," Werner said, pointing to the regular rollovers of 16-wheeled diesel rigs. "But you would be less likely to roll over in the Dagne than in a sports car."

His reasoning for such a statement is the Dagne can hold turns much easier than a sports car due to the aerodynamic design of the body, which banks into the curves — similar to a motorcycle, except that the Dagne's lean is computer-controlled, and its driver will not need a motorcycle license to drive this baby (a typical Class C driver's license will suffice). The fact that two of its wheels are in the front rather than the back helps make the Dagne more stable than other three-wheeled electric cars, Sandoz said. The Dagne has safety features similar to those employed in racecars, such as advanced seatbelts and airbags.

Sandoz and Werner's goal is to have a completed product ready for mass production by 2011, which is none too soon for people excitedly anticipating a takeover by electric cars and hybrids to replace the gas-guzzling monsters we have to share the lanes with now. They hope that the Santa Barbara community will embrace the Dagne and sustainable living. "It's the next hottest thing," said Sandoz. ■

BICI CONT'D

bikes, new and used parts, and tools, Bici Centro has the resources of any bike shop, but with the option for the shop's users to work off use of shop space with small donations or volunteer hours. A dedicated corps of volunteers made the opening of the collective possible by donating time and money to the events and educational programs before there was any official funding available.

One of the programs offered is Earn-a-Bike (EAB), which allows area youth to learn how to build and fix their own bicycle for free. In an era when many children don't necessarily grow up riding bicycles, the main emphasis on the youth program is rider safety. Kids can't take their custom-built bikes home until they've passed an intensive safety course. "There will be a lot more kids riding bikes, and riding bikes safely, as a result of this program," said France. He also unfolded his plans to partner with the City of Santa Barbara and the School District to open multiple after-school programs. "We're talking about seriously expanding youth bike programs in our community," he said, noting that youth outreach is one of the most important parts of Bici Centro's future goals. While it costs participants a few dollars or volunteer hours, the adult classes give valuable skills to people who can't afford or don't want to pay a bicycle mechanic to keep them rolling. Starting with a bare frame, the class puts a bicycle together piece by piece during several weeks.

INSIDE THE CENTER

Being an economically, and to some extent environmentally, motivated bicycle commuter myself, I decided to take a trip down to La Casa de la Raza to see Bici Centro for myself. My '80s vintage Bianchi — which regularly ferries me back and forth between *The Indy's* downtown headquarters and my home in Isla Vista's student ghetto — was in need of a little TLC, so I figured I could pick up a few tips on how to better maintain the azure Italian mount. Walking in the front door to the shop on a Thursday afternoon, the place was abuzz with activity. A group of kids stood near some couches in the corner, comparing notes as France assisted a young man who was trying to repair his bicycle. Beautiful Spanish guitar music and singing wafted in from a room next door, and a couple of volunteers were busy organizing the myriad parts in the collective's two storage rooms. "The education program for adults has gone really well," said Wilson Hubbell, a regular volunteer and one of the instructors of the adult course. We walked past a long row of "parts" bicycles, eventually finding the class prize — a partially rebuilt racing bike that they've been working on, one week at a time.

What struck me most about Bici Centro was its welcoming atmosphere and the diversity of people hanging out there. It is truly an organization that enjoys broad community appeal — some may benefit economically from it, while others with fancier bicycles and more time to spare can enjoy getting involved and lending a helping hand. In any event, it is something that builds a community institution that will most likely be a boon to the alternative transportation movement and the environment.

Y.J.J. Bici Centro is located at 601 East Montecito Street. Shop hours are Thursdays 4-8 p.m. and Saturdays 1-7 p.m. Adult classes are held every Wednesday from 7-8:30 p.m. Youth class schedules will be announced soon. For more information, call 617-3255 or visit bicicentro.org.