



Gabe getting a taste of active transport, Singapore style.



INTERVIEW

Gabe Klein

The Business of Change

Gabe Klein was one of the key people behind car-sharing club Zipcar's success in the U.S. before he became the Transport Commissioner of Washington D.C. and then Chicago. He funnelled the start-up spirit into the public sector and implemented highly successful bike-sharing schemes, "complete street" projects and mega projects like the Chicago Riverwalk. In this interview with *Urban Solutions*, the CLC Visiting Fellow tells us that the government has to operate more like the private sector when implementing such schemes and get public buy-in. He believes that public-private partnerships are key to a sustainable urban future.

What are the key ingredients to the successful implementation of the bike-sharing schemes you spearheaded?

Washington was the first large-scale implementation of bike sharing in the U.S. so nobody here had ever seen it before. We wanted to make the service very professional in terms of ease of use, interaction with the web interface and app, and the quality of the bikes and stations, and for it to feel like it belonged to the people. So we had robust planning and public interaction processes. We built

an online mapping tool to crowdsource people's preferences for the locations of bike stations and let the public pick its name, Capital Bikeshare, or as locals say "CaBi". This system needed to be big with lots of nodes to have utility so we started with 100 stations and 1,000 bikes. The bigger it was, the more it felt like transportation and not just a fun service for tourists. And so it came together in a really nice, professional, and colourful, fun package that now spans three states with 400 stations.



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By the time we got to Chicago, we realised we needed to go even bigger for a city that's 4.5 times the size of D.C. So we launched with 300 stations instead of 100. We spent quite a bit of money designing the look and feel of the "Divvy" brand and the system in partnership with IDEO. We were very successful there. Again, we let the public tell us where they wanted it and then we went big. It's now up to 500 stations in multiple jurisdictions and in Chicago, located every few blocks, within a five-minute walk.

You implemented the Streets for Cycling Plan 2020 in Chicago. Could you share more about your experience planning for, and implementing, the cycling lanes?

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Well, like the bike-sharing programme, it's very important that the bike lane network felt like it belonged to the people. So we spent about eight months holding public meetings in all 73 neighbourhoods as the mayor called for high-quality cycling facilities within a half mile of every Chicagoan—that's 2.7 million people. We had people who didn't agree with us and also those who supported it. I think we were able to have a constructive conversation. What came out of it was that these needed to be safety projects for all modes, not just bike lane projects. We had to look at it more holistically. When we were going to address an issue on the street, like creating a bike lane, how can we also make it safer for pedestrians? How can we make it easier for people to get to transit? We were able to increase the throughput of vehicles and provide space for cycling, which I think was the outcome of the public outreach and a lot of hard work by the great team at the Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT).

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- 01 An example of Divvy's successful marketing is this "Divvy Red" campaign where customers who found the rare red bikes were encouraged to post photos of it on social media sites.
 - 02 Chicagoans walking for safe streets on a new pedestrian crossing downtown, as part of the Vision Zero safety initiative that led to a 7.5% decrease in fatalities one year after its launch.
 - 03 A young Chicagoan helping out with bike lane construction.
 - 04 Like a start-up, the CDOT bootstrapped the implementation of half of the announced 100-mile protected bike lanes before federal money came in.



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You managed to implement 100 miles of protected bike lanes in just four years. How did you do it, and what were the challenges?

We believed in creating “complete streets”, meaning the streets were not primarily for cars. We put together a modal hierarchy that says the streets were for the pedestrians first, transit second, the bike third and the auto last. To our surprise, we had zero backlash as everyone is a pedestrian fundamentally. We started building and retrofitting our streets based on that hierarchy; the aim was 100 miles [160 kilometres] of advanced, protected bike lanes where possible (separated from traffic on major streets), and a total of 645 miles [1,038 kilometres] of bike lanes by 2020. We had no funding so we had to piggyback on construction projects that were already happening, like re-paving projects that overlapped. We also had to market the programme: we hit people in the news, on their street, and explained why we want to do this and the benefits to them. There was some controversy but looking back, not a huge amount, because people understood that we were going to prioritise health, sustainability and economic growth, which the bike supports but the car doesn't.

If you were to advise someone tasked to transform a city's urban mobility, what would be the first things they should do or look into?

I found that I had many more resources than I was used to in the private sector—in the form of people, funding and power to get things done. I think people who've been in government all of their careers may not always recognise the span of control and the change they can effect in short order. I would encourage them to assess their budgets very quickly and understand where the money is coming from and what leverage they have to increase resources where they might need it, say for active transportation. I think that honest, transparent communication with people is very important. One of the strategies that I've tried to employ is to put together a marketing plan based on what we're really trying to do—make cities safer, people healthier, cities more sustainable; to design for children, disabled people, older people; and to create economic growth. It's hard to argue with this mission, particularly if you communicate, responsibly fund and start to execute well.

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Risk-aversion hinders project implementation and innovation. In Singapore, even pilot tests can be resource-intensive and less amenable to feedback and adaptations. How do you create more nimble public agencies?

Coming from the start-up world, I'm a big fan of experimentation, and involving the public in selecting what works. But having said that, when we say pilots, we typically really mean a controlled experiment. If you make your stakeholders—whether it be mayors, council members, shopkeepers, land owners or residents—part of the diagnosis of whether the experiment was working, you'll find that they give you a lot longer leash to play with. Just because it's a pilot doesn't mean it's necessarily by the seat of the pants. But you can put together plans for quick iteration so that you can execute them over and over in different contexts, for different purposes. It's much more fiscally responsible to pilot something, show people how it works, and get their buy-in. We did that with our parking system in D.C., with eight different pilots before we committed millions of taxpayer dollars to a high-tech system that eliminated customer hassle and had huge return on investment for the taxpayers.

In your book *Start-Up City*, you say changes in technology and new business models make it important for governments to be ready to adapt. How has government in the U.S. creatively responded to disruptions?

I'm going to first talk about the introduction of Lyft and Uber and how the government in most cases said, "We're not going to entertain the idea of this competition for our taxi system, so come back later when we're ready."

I would say we did a rather poor job, although some of the technology companies also did a poor job approaching the government. On the upside, it's been a real learning opportunity for both sides. Now there are a lot of government agencies saying, "How do we leverage that service, that business model, that tool to further our own goals?"

After learning from the Uber/Lyft experience, the federal government is now leading with the US\$50 million Smart Cities Challenge—giving US\$50 million to one winning city to institute smart city technology, ranging from sensors, digital wayfinding and Wi-Fi, to autonomous vehicles and so forth.

01 During his CLC Visiting Fellowship, Gabe facilitated a multi-stakeholder workshop to promote a collaborative approach to creating a car-lite district.

02 CLC Director for Research Dr Limin Hee interviews Gabe Klein, as they visited the Jurong district on electric scooters.



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If we have a healthy dialogue, do pilot tests, align our incentives and share the risks and rewards contractually, we can really serve the citizenry better than we have done in the past. There has been a recognition in the U.S. that the key to a sustainable urban future is through private-public partnerships and a focus on outcomes that we want.

But a dichotomy exists between the public and private sectors, due to misalignment of objectives, incentives and cultures. How can we bridge this divide to create a liveable city?

Coming back to the Uber/Lyft examples, ultimately the customer won. We need the private sector to be more focused on working for the greater good, taking a triple bottom line approach to business—People, Planet, and Profit. If you do that you’ll have a business that’s more sustainable in the long term. Pure capitalism can be dangerous just as an unchecked dictatorship on the government side can be problematic. By having this triple bottom line approach to business and a government that is more focused on return

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on investment and actually covering their cost—by the way it’s something the Singapore government does extremely well and we can all take a lesson from—then I think it’s easier for the two sides to work together and achieve better outcomes for the citizenry.

You’re a strong advocate of more transparency and productive communication with the public. What are some tips you could offer in terms of cultivating open public communications?

When I joined the government, I was surprised by how opaque the agency was. The creative planners would talk to the community and say “Yes”, while the engineers were saying “No we can’t do that” behind closed doors. So you had an end product that was very different than what we sold to the people. There was also a lot of back-door communications with council members and other elected officials. We made a conscious effort to

01 Washington D.C.’s District Transportation Access Portal provides detailed, real-time tracking of all its Department of Transportation projects. Each listing includes project budget, percentage completion and even number of overdue tasks.

02 Gabe’s first visit to Singapore.



open up and it made the left-brain people uncomfortable, but it was the right thing to do.

If you're going to convince a customer that a product or service is good for them, you've got to explain the features and benefits. So we tapped social media; we communicated two-way in real time and uploaded all projects on our website with weekly progress updates. Whatever happened, we were transparent and we started our own blog to communicate directly with people. All these paid off and people felt they had a voice. If you're on Twitter and somebody keeps tweeting at you, you have to respond. And I would respond personally—I think that sends a message that this is a new day in government. It's very important, particularly if you're going to have an aggressive programme of initiatives.

What is one last piece of advice with regard to your slogan “getting sh*t done” in cities, quickly and effectively?

Commitment is very important—in terms of funds, leadership from the top, publicly stating what we're going to do and when

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we're going to accomplish it and really break it down, and committing to listen to the public.

There is no reason not to get sh*t done. It's much more fun. Your staff will be much happier achieving things rather than just talking about it. Singapore has such a rich history of getting things done, and like D.C., you have a vertically integrated government. But much more so—it's the country and the city—so your ability to move fast is unparalleled. The things I did in two years, you should get done in 12 months.

What would take a long time is the cultural shift. For instance, it's warm here. Getting somebody on a bike or walking when they're used to a certain social class like driving a BMW with air conditioning—that's going to take time. Starting sooner is very important because the cultural changes are often the long pole in the tent. ●

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