

John Devine on Alternative Transportation: A Climate Digest Interview

Summary

Riding a bike can make you feel like a kid again, and if you commute on your bike, or use other forms of alternative transportation to get where you're going, it can help reduce carbon emissions in our state too. In this conversation, John Devine, Executive Director of Go Georgia (formerly Georgia Bikes), joins host Eriqah Vincent to talk about how his organization's work connects directly to climate action, why equity has to be built into transportation planning, and why he believes active transportation is becoming a normal part of everyday life in Georgia, not just something climate advocates do.

Key Takeaways

- Go Georgia, rebranded from Georgia Bikes in October to reflect a broader mission serving everyone who walks, rolls, or bikes, sees almost everything it does as at least indirectly climate-related, since safer streets for biking and walking directly reduce transportation emissions.
- John authored Drawdown Georgia's Sustainable Transportation Toolkit, which helps Georgians get started commuting by bike, on foot, or by other sustainable means, and includes data on how individual choices add up to meaningful statewide emissions reductions.
- Equity is central to Go Georgia's work: the organization focuses on people who have no choice but to walk or bike unsafe roads, and is mindful that new trails and infrastructure investments can also contribute to gentrification and displacement.
- Georgians interested in expanding alternative transportation locally can connect with existing bike/walk organizations, organize a walking audit of their neighborhood, or start a local "bike to work" day.
- John finds hope in seeing climate work converge across sectors that once operated in silos, and in the growing number of people biking and walking simply because it fits their lives, not because they identify as climate activists.

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Eriqah Vincent: Wonderful, so thank you all so much for joining us once again. My name again is Eriqah Vincent, and we're joined today by John Devine from Go Georgia, formerly Georgia Bikes. I'm so excited to talk to you today, John, and I'd love for you to tell me a little more about yourself, and about the climate-related work you do at Go Georgia.

John Devine: Hey, Eriqah, and hi, everybody watching, I'm super excited to be here, to talk about our work as an organization statewide, and specifically about the climate measures we're

getting into. I'm John Devine, I'm the Executive Director of Go Georgia, very recently Georgia Bikes — just early October, we launched our new brand, to account for people who walk and roll, in addition to people who ride bikes, throughout Georgia. The tagline we're using is, "Your voice for active transportation and recreation." The way we look at that is serving everyone throughout the state who gets around on foot, in a wheelchair, on a scooter, on a bicycle, and so on, to access healthcare, employment, education, and shopping, or just to have fun on the weekend or after work. We think that by serving all these different kinds of users of complete streets and trails, we're going to be able to reach more people, and get our message across, to make life better for everybody.

I come to the organization from a background in city planning. I joined what was then Georgia Bikes three years ago, after spending 20 years in the public sector. As a community and regional planner, most of my employment was helping cities and counties become better places, put together an idea of who they want to be, and how they want to get there. My job was to help them assemble all those parts, look inward, and then put together a blueprint for how they wanted to achieve those things. I was happiest doing that job when I was working on biking and walking plans, and on projects like the Firefly Trail, which starts here in Athens and will run 40 miles down to Union Point in Greene County. These are the kinds of things I've always really enjoyed doing, and I feel very fortunate to get to do this on a full-time, permanent basis now, for my work.

Eriqah Vincent: That's wonderful, I love that so much. Thank you for giving us that background, John, on your journey to this role, that's really important, and I'd heard of Georgia Bikes before, so I'm glad you explained a bit of the rebranding piece. That's part of our next question too — you all recently rebranded to Go Georgia. What is the climate-related work you all are working on, and did that work inspire you all to change and rebrand the organization?

John Devine: I think, for us, going from Georgia Bikes to Go Georgia isn't just representative of expanding the different modes and types of users we work with in the transportation and recreation systems — it's a chance to more broadly represent the areas in which we work, through our brand, through our name, because we've already been doing a lot of this work for a long time. I'd say almost everything we do is at least indirectly climate-related — as we teach kids safe cycling, or teach law enforcement officers how to protect us while we're out on the roadway, we're making communities better across the state for biking and walking, which is inherently going to reduce emissions and fight climate change, in maybe the most bottom-up way we know how — by creating a sense in communities that people should be walking and biking, and that they can do so safely.

The other big component of the work we're doing at Go Georgia is to make those communities better places, through infrastructure, planning, policy, and advocacy — that happens at the city level, county level, regional level, state level, and we even work with the federal government sometimes on policy initiatives or funding mechanisms. So we try to be active across all levels of government, to make cities and counties in Georgia simply better places to ride a bike, take a walk, be a wheelchair user, access your community outside of a car. Again, that inherently has to come full circle back into climate activism, because we're simply giving people the tools they need to be less impactful on the climate.

Eriqah Vincent: Absolutely, I love that. I live in the suburbs of Atlanta, on the east side, and I'm a big advocate for live-work-play — I think people sometimes get nervous about the live-work-play terminology, because sometimes it means gentrification, to be honest, so folks get worried

about that, but I'm a big advocate for that type of active community, and sometimes in suburban areas, like where I live, we get less of that, we spend so much time in our cars. I love what you're saying about the work you're doing at Go Georgia. You talked a bit about your city planning work, and how that led you here, but I wondered if you wanted to say more about what brought you to that work at Go Georgia, and why you're passionate about alternative transportation as a climate solution here in Georgia.

John Devine: It's interesting — it occurred to me, maybe about a year into my time here at Go Georgia, Georgia Bikes, that I was basically doing the job I'd always wanted to do, from the time I was still in grad school. I remember vividly sitting in the computer lab at UT Austin, where I did my master's, and we were about to move here to Athens, and I contacted our local advocacy organization — they're still called Bike Athens, they were there 22 years ago when we moved here — and I said, we're moving to Athens, I would love to take a job with you all, and I got a very polite email back that essentially said, we can't hire you, we don't have any money to take on staff, but please reach out when you get here, and we'll talk about ways we can work together. I ended up joining the board of Bike Athens, got very involved in local advocacy, to make this place a better community, with complete streets, with trails, with better policies, to keep people safe while they're out there doing the thing that they do.

Part of that is choice — for people like me, I have the ability, whether through physical ability or through resources, to drive, or to walk, or take the bus, or bike. There are a lot of people who are either in a position where they can't afford to have a private automobile, or have a disability that prohibits them from either driving or riding a bike, or are just in an area where that's not going to make sense for them. I think it's a challenge for us to represent that entire spectrum of the statewide community of people who bike, walk, and roll — but at the same time, no one else is really doing that. So I think we're still trying to find out how that works, and we will be for a while — I hope we never stop trying to figure it out, because if we do, then we're just not serving the people we're supposed to serve.

As we grow into our climate work — again, that's been something we've done for a long time, inherently and indirectly, but now we're acknowledging it more than we ever have, and we're working with groups like Drawdown Georgia. We're trying to figure out how we can best participate in the two big climate plans happening right now, both at the state level and the Atlanta regional level, to be able to say, great, you've identified biking, walking, and rolling as a means to lowering emissions and fighting climate change, fantastic — what are the implementation measures? Of our team of four total staff at Go Georgia, statewide, two of us are certified AICP planners, and what that means is we're very focused on the mechanisms to get to the end goal. We've done this for our careers — as planners, we know that without an implementation program, or the right implementation program, you can claim any goal you want to. So we're really excited about digging in with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, and the Atlanta Regional Commission, and working with our partners at the Georgia Department of Transportation, GDOT, to say, look, somebody's got to implement these great policy goals, and it's probably going to be GDOT, because GDOT oversees the transportation system in the state of Georgia. Is GDOT involved in the planning process? How can we, as Go Georgia, be an intermediary between the plan-makers at Georgia DNR and the folks who will necessarily be the implementers at GDOT? So it's — everything is new and exciting, it's hard to say no to anything, because there are so many great things happening, and we've spread our net very wide right now.

Eriqah Vincent: Wonderful, that sounds like wonderful work. My next question — I talked a little about live-work-play, and you've talked about disabilities, and people who, for whatever reason, aren't able to own their own car, but also the need for alternative transportation for emissions reduction. How does alternative transportation intersect with the issue of equity in Georgia? How do you see that intersection?

John Devine: First, and probably most obvious, is that we're working on behalf of people, to get them safely from place to place — if we're not doing that at the root of our daily and long-term work, then we're failing. So it's most important for us to do what we can to help level the playing field, to facilitate people being able to get around equitably, fairly, and with as little impact on the climate as we can. One big thing to think about in everything we do is the people who have to be out there — the people who don't have another choice. If we look at a dangerous roadway, maybe in the area where you live in suburban Atlanta, it's not good enough to just say, I don't think people are really going to be biking or walking there — because they might have to, they might not have other options for their point A to point B commute, from home to work.

There's also public transportation — bus and train systems throughout Georgia's cities get people where they need to go, routinely, but there isn't really a statewide group advocating for users of public transit. There is a statewide transit association, but it's more of a provider's association, of the transit agencies that exist on the city and county level throughout the state. So we think there's probably a role we can play there, we're just not sure yet what it'll be.

Eriqah Vincent: I think you make a really good point about unsafe roadways, because, while we live in a beautiful neighborhood over here on the east side of Atlanta, there are places where the sidewalk just stops, places where you have a sidewalk in these beautiful, suburban, wooded areas that's also right next to a road. I do see development trying to make it more walkable and safer for people who are on foot, riding a bike, in a wheelchair, or using other forms of personal transportation — I see it shifting a bit, but I also see places where we can make it even safer, and encourage people to do that, from a health standpoint too — it dovetails into so many things. I think you're making a very good point about the equity piece too. One thing you mentioned was gentrification, and it's a big topic, because public investment may, or typically would, affect people's ability to stay in their homes — as a city or county invests in a neighborhood, it's probably going to increase the value of homes there, which can make it more difficult for people to stay where they are.

John Devine: As a planner, you can look at solutions to that, in government, nonprofits, universities too — that's not really something Go Georgia has been too involved in yet, but as we continue to expand and diversify our work, there will be impacts from our planning for new facilities, for example, and trails typically will impact, or facilitate, gentrification more than some on-street infrastructure might. If you look at multi-use trails, they often go through neighborhoods, and that feels great when you live there, but it may not feel so great when the value of your property increases, and you open your property tax bill and say, what happened — I may live in a better neighborhood now, I may have an easier time getting around, but am I going to be able to live in this neighborhood in the future? So it's not a problem our little nonprofit, in the transportation and recreation sector, can solve, but it is something we need to be aware of in everything we do — we can't just say, let somebody else worry about that.

Eriqah Vincent: Sure, yeah, I think it's important for all of us to do the few things we do really well — but if we're doing them collaboratively, with all the voices in the room, even the two of us here can make sure all of those pieces are on the table, and all those things are being

considered. Folks who live in neighborhoods that might be divested or disinvested from also want green space, and trails, and safe spaces for their children to play, just as much as people who might live in higher-income neighborhoods do — so making sure they have that too, while also being able to stay in their neighborhoods, is important.

John Devine: The equity work of demanding improvements in different places in your community can also get you into trouble.

Eriqah Vincent: Thank you so much for that, that's really important. So switching gears a little — you authored Drawdown Georgia's Sustainable Transportation Toolkit, so tell us about it, and why Georgians should take a look at it.

John Devine: Yeah, this is really exciting, and the timing of it coinciding almost exactly with our relaunch from Georgia Bikes into Go Georgia was great for us, because it allowed us to think more broadly, get those ideas down on paper, and translate them directly into a personal climate action toolkit for people throughout the state. So I think if you're new to the idea of commuting, or even going to the grocery store, on foot or bike or other means of sustainable, active transportation, this is a place to get started — a place to learn things that are probably going to seem like old hat to a lot of people who've been doing this for a long time. You'll pick up tips on everything from what kind of bike you might want to commute on — the best bike is usually, at first, the one you already have. Don't spend too much time worrying about what your bike looks like compared to other people's bikes — if it works, if it's safe, then it's a great commuter bike at first, because it lets you try out the idea of commuting by bike without a lot of investment. Walking is a little easier to suit up for — you want a pair of shoes that feels comfortable, and lets you not worry too much about blisters and trip hazards. All of this is in the toolkit, as well as lists of different resources for local groups you might want to connect with.

There's some really good data in there too, about the potential impacts we, as individuals, can have collectively, on a state level, in reducing emissions from the transportation sector in Georgia. It's probably not too significant individually, but on a statewide level, those impacts really do add up — to the extent that I believe Georgia DNR has identified bicycle riding as the single biggest potential impact for climate change in the transportation sector statewide. So we think giving people the tools they need to try this, to get used to it, to be able to get there safely the first time, without having to worry too much about whether they've checked all the boxes — here are the boxes — is a great way to learn the elemental, beginner-level things you'll want to know, to get started commuting on an active and sustainable basis.

Eriqah Vincent: Wonderful, thank you so much, I really do hope people will check out that Sustainable Transportation Toolkit. So, what are the concrete steps the Georgia climate community can take to help grow alternative transportation at the local level?

John Devine: If there's a local organization in your community doing work in active transportation and recreation, link up with them as soon as you can, because the worst thing you could do is come up with the same idea, on a slightly different plane, as the people already doing the work, and end up not working together. We still operate the Georgia Bikes website for now — GeorgiaBikes.org has a list of local bike/walk organizations throughout the state. If there's one in your community, please contact them, get to know them, and see how you can help with what they're doing, and how they can help with what you're doing. But if there isn't, there are opportunities to create that kind of work from the ground up in your community, and it doesn't need to be overcomplicated — you can start very small, by organizing your neighbors,

getting friends together who may be like-minded about the need to advocate for climate solutions through active transportation in your community.

One great way to do that is to conduct a walking audit of your area — simply say, we're going out here with a checklist, and we're going to look at how safe or unsafe it is to walk or bike through this corridor. Pick an area about a half-mile long that gets a lot of foot or bike traffic, and go out and analyze it. Make sure you get your city or county transportation department to come with you — it helps to have a local elected official there too, to take it all in and get a better sense of what's happening in their district, or at least the community they represent. So walking audits are a great way to get started, and generate enthusiasm among people in the area. We love being able to work with communities and assist them in putting together a connectivity concept, a vision that shows ideas for connecting residents with destinations through complete streets infrastructure and multi-use trails. If that's something of interest to your community, and you don't have that happening yet, you can reach out to planning@georgiabikes.org — we still have our Georgia Bikes email addresses too — and we'll hopefully be able to help you with very high-level conceptual planning, to get your community thinking about how it may connect for people to bike, walk, and work.

Otherwise, I think one great thing about climate-related work is that there are a lot of people who support it. We hear a lot about skeptics, but there are far more people who understand the challenge and are prepared to meet it in their own way. If you find those people in your community, start a local bike-to-work day — it doesn't have to be the national Bike to Work Day in May, you could do it in November if you want, there's no reason not to get people organized to try something out together. There are tons of different ways people can start this kind of work in their communities, but I'll come back to and stress this — if there's a local organization doing great work in your community, just reach out to them, they're really going to be the best place to get started.

Eriqah Vincent: What's your favorite thing about riding a bike in Georgia?

John Devine: I think my favorite thing about riding a bike in Georgia is that it almost never fails to make me feel like a kid again. I get on my bike and feel the freedom I felt when I was allowed to ride my bike around my neighborhood at three years old, with a couple of older cousins who lived down the street, and that felt, at the time, like just a very core, essential part of my childhood. Looking back on it, you realize how uncommon that probably is for a lot of people to be able to do now, especially young kids — it was such a core part of growing up, being able to go anywhere in what seemed, as a kid, like the enormous universe of my neighborhood, and have access to things I wouldn't otherwise have had. So now, when I get on my bike, I still feel that sense of general fun, and being more at ease — you get on your bike, and you may feel your blood pressure drop a little, or your stress levels drop a little. I ride my bike around town quite a bit for transportation, and I ride trails on my bike too, and when I get into the woods on a mountain bike trail, that's another feeling, apart from the freedom and relaxation. The mountain bike feeling is a little different — I get to ride my mountain bike in lots of different places in Georgia, and that feels exciting, and I don't want to say dangerous, because I haven't really crashed a lot over the years, but there's a certain element of excitement in it that doesn't come from riding around town. I haven't crashed my bike all that much over the years, but I did manage to do it twice on the same ride about a month ago.

Eriqah Vincent: That's beautiful. I love rollerblading — that's been my main thing since I was really little, and we started doing that and taking more walks. I started skating around my

subdivision when we first moved over here, and similar to what you said, I felt like a kid again, that very healthy exposure to just being outside. I'm glad we had that similar experience. So, our last question, the one we ask all our interviewees — what's giving you hope around climate solutions in our state?

John Devine: Conversations like this, alliances that we have with groups like Drawdown — we've got a board member at Go Georgia who's very heavily involved in his local group in his community, Sustainable Newton, and organizations like that, on the local level, on the state level. There are so many different ways climate work is converging, from different origins, different industries and sectors, and to me, that's really starting to signify that it's bleeding into the general consciousness more than it has before. It feels like, in that Venn diagram, there are so many more components with an overlap in climate work than there used to be. As Go Georgia does its climate work, we're one little piece — transportation is just one part of climate change, we fully recognize that, and the sidewalk and trail role is just one part of reducing emissions' impact on the climate. But at the same time, it's a big part, and through the energy sector, or agriculture, there are a lot of other big parts — it's really nice to see this overlap happening through a hub-type organization like Drawdown. So, to me, that convergence of all these different sectors coming together, and having overlap that may be a little outside their traditional wheelhouse, through a group like Drawdown, and through a statewide effort like the Climate Plan, is really encouraging.

Eriqah Vincent: That's great. You said something earlier about it all dovetailing together and being less siloed — I think you're absolutely right. I also think it's very easy, because of the images we're inundated with every day, to think that, oh, in the South, or in Georgia, you can't get anything done when it comes to climate. But I've said, on many of these interviews we've done in this series, Georgians are creative — I'm originally from New Jersey, but I've been here for some time, and folks are creative in the South, folks are creative in Georgia, folks have figured out ways to get things done that don't need to be overly political, and are very hopeful. I think the work you all are doing at Go Georgia, and in other places, is a true testament to finding ways to make it happen, within the confines of what we can do with what we've got. That speaks to the resilience of the climate community, but also to your point — other folks who just enjoy something like biking, who don't even see it as taking a stance or being an activist, but are still contributing to reducing the impacts of climate change.

John Devine: Sure, yeah. You don't see as much of the apparent, obvious "climate warrior" represented in the bike transportation demographic as you used to — we used to look around Athens, and if there was a person on a bike, I would almost definitely know who they were. That's changed so much — the demographic of people riding around town or commuting on foot, they're not necessarily doing it anymore because they're a climate advocate. It's just taking root in so many more different demographics and identities — people asking, why do you walk to work? I didn't get enough exercise before, and now I have 20, 30 minutes a day, on each end of my workday, getting my steps in, relieving stress, allowing myself to be part of the community, where before I was opening the garage door, rolling down the driveway, parking in the parking deck, and going up the elevator to my office. These are the kinds of things people just want to do, for a lot of different reasons, and now that it's not just, I'm on my bike or I'm walking because I'm that environmentalist who wants to not be in my car, I think the avalanche is gaining steam. Once it gets to that critical mass, of having more people do it, and being more visible, more representative of the statewide population, I think it'll really start to snowball, and become this unstoppable movement of things that just happen regularly — not, oh, there's that

weirdo who rides his bike to work. I don't think you're going to see much of that in the future — I think it's going to be a regular part of urban, and hopefully suburban and rural, life in Georgia.

Eriqah Vincent: I totally agree. Thank you so much, John, for this interview, and thank you to Go Georgia for the work you all are doing. I think it's so important to have these conversations around all the ways we're reducing our carbon footprint and our climate impact. Thank you very much for this conversation. Thank you all so much for joining us, thank you again, John, and we'll see you all next time.