

Student ideas for a greener, safer life

How about exercise bikers generating energy for the grid?

By Steve Rubenstein



Photos by Paul Chinn / The Chronicle

Genie Wungsukit (left), a senior at Oakland High, describes her team's bicycle transportation plan to Sibley Simon at a policy summit for students at International House in Berkeley.



Fourth-graders from Malcolm X Academy in San Francisco explain their urban planning project at the Y-PLAN Policy Summit in Berkeley.



Photos by Paul Chinn / The Chronicle

Above: Fourth-graders from Malcolm X Academy in San Francisco explain their urban planning project at a policy summit.



Left: Shirl Buss talks to Sofia Wynn (left) and Kimora Ama about the Malcolm X Academy project.

Hundreds of people will be generating electricity in downtown Oakland by pedaling exercise bikes if a couple of high school students ever manage to get their idea rolling.

“It might not ever happen,” admitted Anastasia Landry, 16. “But it’s a good idea. We’d have new gyms spread out all over Oakland. The bikes would be hooked up to the grid. I think it would help people get their lives together.”

Anastasia, from Skyline High School in

Oakland, was among 100 or so Bay Area students who gathered Thursday in a Berkeley meeting hall, science fair-style, to share their ideas for making the world greener, safer and happier.

The ideas included flying cars, giant holes to turn rising sea water into attractive fish ponds, streets paved with mah-jongg tiles, time limits for showers, a system of Tokyo-style capsule hotels and special dormitories made out of compressed dirt. Teachers would be housed in those.

It was all part of a daylong conference sponsored by the Center for Cities and Schools at UC Berkeley. The center invited kids from around the bay to spend the day on campus to share their ideas, and no schoolkid needs to be asked twice to take a day off from school for a field trip, even an educational one.

Aaliyah Sibanda, 15, also of Skyline High School, came up with the time limit for showers. People who take quick showers would be rewarded with gift certificates to local stores. People who take long showers would pay fines.

San Francisco Bay would be a lot cleaner, said Vanessa Chavez, 18, if the city would install giant nets on storm drain outfall pipes. The nets would catch junk the way that mesh nets on home dryers catch lint.

Vanessa, a student at Kennedy High School in Richmond, said all the city would need to do is hire about 100 people to go around town during a storm to clean out all the nets.

“It would be kind of disgusting,” she said. “But it would help clean Richmond and provide a lot of work for people.”

Andres Yañes, 13, of Escuela Popular in East San Jose, said his ideas for a fleet of flying cars “might seem silly but it would make getting around a lot easier.” He did not know where to find the flying cars just yet.

Affordable living for schoolteachers is right around the corner if Marshawn Young, 18, gets his teacher dormitories off the drawing board. The teachers would have to double up in small rooms inside large buildings made from compressed dirt blocks. Rent would be \$500 a month, which, he said, even a teacher could handle.

“We need to find a place where teachers can afford to live,” said Marshawn, another Kennedy High student. He added that the motivation for the dormitories was entirely altruistic and not a way to make the teachers of Richmond spend their days encased in dirt.

There were adults on hand — teachers mostly — but they tried not to splash too much cold water on the more unconventional ideas.

Teacher Terry Van Hare said she had given Anastasia an “A” for her electricity-generating bicycle gym idea even though she said, in a low voice, that it probably wasn’t practical.

“I had a conversation with her, and we talked about how the bicycles would probably not be able to generate enough energy,” she said. “We did a cost benefit analysis. She understands.”

On hand to take in the ideas were city planners, city managers and some representatives from the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, the body that will oversee Andres’ fleet of flying cars in the event they get off the ground.

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