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Autor: Müller, Jürg
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The bicycle's path into the Federal Constitution

Footpaths and hiking trails have long held constitutional status.

If approved by the Swiss people on 23 September 2018, cycle paths will receive the same honour.

JÜRG MÜLLER

“Incredible” was how Ursula Wyss described the increase in cycling in the federal capital in April 2018. The city councilor responsible for transport was clearly very surprised herself at the cycling boom. Cycling had risen by 35 % in the short period from 2014 to 2017. The city is now looking to step it up a gear by increasing the proportion that cyclists make up of total traffic from 15 % at the moment to 20 % by 2030.



In good shape: More importance is to be attached to cycling and it will receive constitutional status.

Photo: Keystone

The city of Berne is not a unique case. Cycling is on the up nationwide (also see *Swiss Review* no. 3/2018). The bicycle is now also set to find its way into the Federal Constitution – provided Swiss voters approve a federal decree on cycle paths at the ballot box on 23 September 2018. This proposal involves supplementing Article 88 on footpaths and hiking trails, which has been part of the Constitution for 40 years. It has resulted in the creation of a unique network of footpaths and hiking trails. An extensive network of cycle paths is now also to be established in Switzerland.

Cross-party praise

The idea comes from the bike initiative by Pro Velo, an umbrella organisation representing the interests of cyclists. The Federal Council also supported the basic thrust of the proposal. It put forward a slightly watered-down counterproposal: federal government will bear the same responsi-

bilities as for the footpaths and hiking trails, thus restricting itself to basic framework legislation. The planning, construction and maintenance of the cycle paths will be the responsibility of the cantons and communes. Federal government cannot take on any new duties due to tight financial and staff restrictions, according to national government. The counterproposal therefore does not provide for any funding obligation. Federal government can nevertheless lay down principles for cycle path networks. It can also support and coordinate cantonal measures for the construction and maintenance of such networks.

Cycling as a mode of transport received overwhelming support from all parties in Parliament. No criticism at all was voiced in the Council of States. Only the SVP rejected the Federal Council's counterproposal in the National Council. Parliamentary group spokesperson Thomas Hurter said that no additional measures were required as “Switzerland is already a cycling nation”. This idea was refuted by Bastien Girod, the Greens National Councillor, who contended that the lack of infrastructure prevented Switzerland from becoming a cycling nation as “yellow lines are not enough”. SP National Councillor Evi Allemann said that Switzerland needs to catch up with other countries abroad. Various speakers underlined the benefits of cycling. It could help to alleviate peak traffic and reduce energy consumption, and it has health benefits.

Objective achieved, initiative withdrawn

After parliament's approval of the counterproposal, the authors of the bike initiative returned the favour by withdrawing their popular initiative. They declared that their goal had been achieved. “The federal decree on bicycles addresses the core issues of the initiative, namely giving cycle paths equivalent status to footpaths and hiking trails,” stated SP National Councillor Matthias Aebscher, president of the association behind the bike initiative. The committee behind the proposal is now backed by numerous organisations from the fields of tourism, health, sport, transport, business and the environment. Even the car-friendly Touring Club Suisse (TCS) supports the initiative. TCS Vice-President and FDP National Councillor Thierry Burkart remarked: “The separation of traffic flows is in the interests of all road users, including motorists. It helps to create capacity.”