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Andy Rosendahl restocks a Green Bike rack Monday in Green Bay, Wis. Some of the bike-sharing program's bikes were stolen, so the city will re-evaluate the program's honor system when the bikes are stored this winter.

By William Glasheen for USA TODAY

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By Alan Gomez, USA TODAY

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Poll: Actions don't match attitudes

What polls, activists reveal

From New York to San Francisco, cities across the country intent on getting greener through bicycle programs are finding a difficult road ahead of them.

Early enthusiasm to reduce traffic congestion and pollution through bike programs is being tempered by questions over funding and who's held liable if someone is injured on a government-owned bicycle, and even "anti-bike activists."

"There are more questions than answers," said Ref Lindmark, a transportation planner for King County, Wash., who is helping Seattle develop a bike-sharing program.

The first waves of bike-sharing programs worked on the honor system. Cities would put bikes that were donated or left over from police auctions on bike racks around the city and trust that users would bring them back.

Green Bay, Wis., began that kind of program this year and learned the same lesson that others have learned: The bikes get stolen.

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So this winter, when Green Bay pulls its bikes off the street because of the weather, the city will re-examine its program, said Kevin King, who runs the city's Green Bike Program.

Seeking solutions

The answer to that problem may be to emulate a system created in Paris.

The French capital has 20,000 bikes for public use at self-service racks. Users who have registered with a credit card can check out a bike by swiping a card.

Washington, D.C., started the first self-service bike-rental



Enlarge

By William Glasheen for USA TODAY

Green Bay's Green Bike Program uses donated bikes and bikes left unclaimed at the police department.

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program in the country in August and has registered more than 900 users. Jim Sebastian, a transportation planner for the district's Department of Transportation, said SmartBike DC averages about 150 rides a day with the roughly 100 bikes that are on the street. Only one bike has been stolen.

Even so, King and others worry that replacement costs in bike-rental programs could drive some users away. If a bike is stolen or lost in the D.C. program, users must pay a replacement fee of \$550. "A lot of people would say, 'I'm not signing that contract,'" King said. "For \$600, you can buy a pretty nice bike."

Costs and concerns

Another factor slowing bike programs is funding.

The D.C. program is being completely funded by Clear Channel Outdoor under an agreement that gives the company advertising rights on the city's bus stops. If the program makes a profit, the city gets a portion.

Chicago officials put out a request last year for private companies to run a bike-rental program, but Brian Steele of the city's Department of Transportation said both proposals would have cost the city too much money.

Lindmark said transportation departments around the country are already overstressed as high fuel prices hurt bus systems. He said they don't have an advertising program like D.C.'s, and without any state or federal grants to tap into, the city needs help

from the private sector.

"We don't really have a big pot of money," Lindmark said.

Legal concerns also have curbed the programs.

Boston city officials have been trying to mimic the Paris program and are hoping to have a bike-sharing program in place by 2010. Nicole Freedman, director of the city's bicycle program, said sorting out the legal issues has slowed the process.

If a person who rents a bike from a city — or a company contracting with the city — gets injured while using it, it's unclear who could be at fault. While no major legal battles have been reported in the Paris program, Freedman said that could be far different in Boston and other U.S. cities.

"There's more of a tendency to sue here," she said. "We're confident that we can get a solution that will work, but we haven't nailed it down 100%."

San Francisco sees similar concerns in trying to implement its own bike-sharing program, but they have a unique roadblock. In 2006, a city resident sued to stop the creation of more than 40 miles of new bike lanes, arguing that the city had not properly reviewed how the bikes would affect traffic. A judge agreed and granted an injunction, halting all bike projects ever since.

Nathan Ballard, spokesman for San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom, said city officials were stunned to find "anti-bike activists" roaming the city, but he said they are still planning on adding the bike lanes and a bike-sharing program. "Who can be against bicycles?" Ballard asked. "But we are going to move forward with this no matter what. We're just suffering a slight delay."

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gjayk wrote: 2d 11h ago

I agree with akynion, bike lanes are the key. Borrowing bikes I think is a good idea if you can make it work. Get people involved, once they are they will likely buy their own bikes, especially if there are lanes where cyclists can ride more safely.

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akynion wrote: 2d 12h ago

How about following the example of the Dannish who have a high percentage of bike riders. In Copenhagen, you simply insert a coin in the bike rack, borrow the gov.bike which is painted green if I remember (or at least the wheels) and return it to any coin operated bike rack. You get your coin back and you have had a free ride. I am sure someone could still steal the bikes, and paint them a different color, and someone could break into the coin boxes and get a dollar for their trouble...but it seems to work well.

Unfortunately, we need to improve our biking lanes and familiarize drivers to yield to bikes, the same way they yield to another car....we have a long way to go on this one....

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grooves wrote: 2d 12h ago

Hopped Up Harry wrote: 1h 46m ago

There's more of a tendency to sue here," she said. "We're confident that we can get a solution that will work, but we haven't nailed it down 100%."

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theresabothe wrote: 2d 12h ago

Bicycles are an ideal means of getting from point A to B without any preparation. Since our lives are entwined with gadgets anyway, the bicycle will hopefully become more significant.

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N-Otis wrote: 2d 14h ago

RidingHigh, that's because we don't get treated like legitimate traffic....in the city (Philly is unfortunately mine) it's often a matter of take up a lane or get run off the road. Getting treated like S**t makes one a lot less inclined to obey the rules. You are spot-on about the thievery though.

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N-Otis wrote: 2d 14h ago

Powergirl, you're a tool and that's not funny. CWS, so it's ok for people in CT to go for a lazy Sunday drive in the country, but not a lazy Sunday bike ride? No sir. Pinchy is right. Motorists have to deal with the inconvenience of a slow cyclist, waiting until it is safe to pass just like you would with a slow car or tractor (since you are talking about country roads...).

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RidingHigh wrote: 2d 14h ago

Why is this a surprise? When I lived in a city, people would steal anything you didn't have locked up and put away - cities concentrate more thieves, homeless, scumbags and wierdo's and kids with too much time on their hands in one place. I even had someone steal my doorbell button right off the front of my house of all things for Pete's sake. As far as bicycles go, a lot of these people have a strange double standard - they insist that they have as much right in the middle of a lane as a automobile but then they consistently disobey traffic laws.

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Hopped Up Harry wrote: 2d 14h ago

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cws1981 wrote: 2d 14h ago

Pinchy: I don't disagree with your thoughts but in practice it depends where you live. I live in CT. It has narrow, hilly, badly repaired, country roads. Cars and bikes do not mix. None of the bikes on our roads are there to go to work and be green; re: Boston, Chicago, SFran etc. They are people out there to exercise or whatever reason. It is illegal to block a road in CT and bikes constantly block the roads. There is just not enough room for bikes and cars and trucks. They have a choice to ride a bike or not. Commuters have no choice.

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shoeyaya wrote: 2d 14h ago

You have to really suck to steal a bike. You can get one at a garage sale for \$10, ride it, and know you aren't a thief.

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