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Bicycle-Sharing Program to Be First of Kind in U.S.



Ed Alcock for The New York Times

Bikes waiting for pickup at a self-service docking station in Paris, where the Vélib sharing program began last summer.

By BERNIE BECKER
Published: April 27, 2008

WASHINGTON — Starting next month, people here will be able to rent a bicycle day and night with the swipe of a membership card.

A new public-private venture called SmartBike DC will make 120 bicycles available at 10 spots in central locations in the city. The automated program, which district officials say is the first of its kind in the nation, will operate in a similar fashion to car-sharing programs like Zipcar.

The district has teamed up with an advertiser, [Clear Channel Outdoor](#), to put the bikes on the streets.

“There’s a lot of stress on our transit systems currently,” said Jim Sebastian, who manages bicycle and pedestrian programs for Washington’s Transportation Department. Offering another option, Mr. Sebastian said, “will help us reduce congestion and pollution,” as well as parking problems.

In the deal, Clear Channel will have exclusive advertising rights in the city’s bus shelters. The company has reached a similar deal with San Francisco. Chicago and Portland, Ore., are also considering proposals from advertisers.

For a \$40 annual membership fee, SmartBike users can check out three-speed bicycles for three hours at a time. The program will not provide helmets but does encourage their use.

Similar programs have proved successful in Europe. The Vélib program in Paris and Bicing in Barcelona, Spain, both started around a year ago and already offer thousands of bicycles.

Mr. Sebastian, who started trying to bring bike-sharing to Washington even before its success in Paris and Barcelona, said he believed that the program could grow within a year and hoped that it would eventually offer 1,000 bicycles.

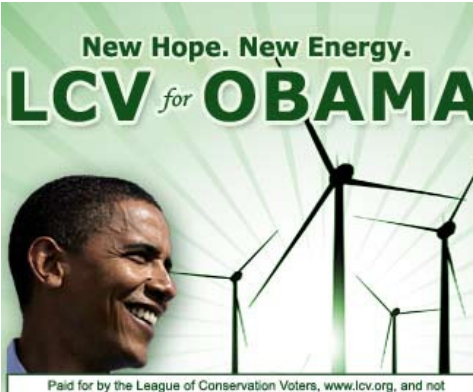
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While automated bike-sharing programs are new to the United States, the idea of bike-sharing is hardly novel. Milan, Amsterdam and Portland have all had lower-tech free bike-sharing programs in the past, with Amsterdam's dating to the 1960s.

But "studies showed that many bikes would get stolen in a day, or within a few weeks," said Paul DeMaio, a Washington-area bike-sharing consultant. "In Amsterdam, they would often find them in the canals."

Improved technology allows programs to better protect bicycles. In Washington, SmartBike subscribers who keep bicycles longer than the three-hour maximum will receive demerits and could eventually lose renting privileges. Bicycles gone for more than 48 hours will be deemed lost, with the last user charged a \$200 replacement fee.

That technology comes with a price, which is one reason cities and advertisers started joining forces to offer bike-sharing. The European programs would cost cities about \$4,500 per bike if sponsors did not step in, Mr. DeMaio said.

Cities realize "they literally have to spend no money on designing, marketing or maintaining" a bike-sharing program, said Martina Schmidt of Clear Channel Outdoor. Washington will keep the revenue generated by the program.

Bike-sharing has become a "public service subsidized by advertising," said Bernard Parisot, the president and co-chief executive officer of JCDecaux North America, an outdoor advertiser that made a proposal to bring bike-sharing to Chicago.

But, Mr. Parisot added, if users had to pay all of the costs for bike-sharing, "they would probably just take a cab."

The low cost could be one of the program's major selling points.

At [George Washington University](#) in Foggy Bottom, one of the program's 10 locations, students were unsure how often they would use SmartBike, but said its price made it worth a try.

"I'd probably use it more in the summer than winter," said Dewey Archer, a senior. "But for \$40? That's cheaper than gas."

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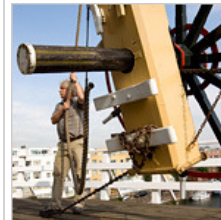
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