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Omaha's making room for bicycles on buses

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Helmets and Spandex could be a common sight on Metro Area Transit buses this summer.

For the first time, MAT is equipping its 130 buses with bike racks.

Each rack will be mounted to the front of a bus. Each will hold two bikes.

MAT Executive Director Curt Simon said the rack program is being started in conjunction with the new pedestrian bridge between Omaha and Council Bluffs, which is scheduled to open in November. About \$100,000 in federal grant money tied to the ongoing bridge project will be used to buy the racks. The money is for transit projects related to the bridge.

"It's a whole new program," Simon said of the racks. "With what's going on with gas (prices), this could be something that people really take advantage of."

Over the next month or so, MAT will test two kinds of racks and decide which type to buy. The goal is to have all of the racks purchased and installed so that people can use them this summer and fall.

Simon said the bike racks will let people visit different trails without having to put racks on their cars.

"You could ride the bus to the Keystone Trail and then take the bus back home," he said.

Charlie Ticknor, sales manager at the Trek Bicycle Store of Omaha, is excited by the plan. She said Omaha doesn't have a developed east-west trail system, so getting to the trails has required bikers to ride on busy streets.

"It's a huge step in the right direction," Ticknor said. "I like Omaha, but they seem to kind of be playing catch-up. . . . Now with the gas prices hiked up, I'm hoping that more people look to bike-riding and other forms of alternative transportation."

Denver, Chicago, Minneapolis and Kansas City, Mo., already have bike racks on their public buses. Riders put their bikes into the racks and secure them before boarding.

Des Moines installed racks on its buses in 2005. Since then the city has held promotions

to encourage people to use them. Last October, for example, Des Moines offered free bus rides to people who put bikes in the racks.

Des Moines riders with bikes also won't have to pay fares during the national Bike to Work Week in May, said Brian Litchfield, chief development officer for the Des Moines Area Regional Transit Authority.

"The bike racks have been hugely successful for us," Litchfield said. "Folks can utilize them, but also, from a community perspective, it's progressive and kind of a cool thing."

There's even competition among bike riders to get a rack spot on the busier buses, he said. Each rack holds two bikes.

Litchfield said some commuters "ride their bike to the bus stop to try to beat (other riders) to the bike rack." But he added, "We haven't had many overcrowding issues. Most folks will wait for the next bus."

Simon said MAT is still considering how it will promote the bike racks on Omaha buses. In addition to disseminating brochures, MAT likely will partner with area health and safety groups to spread the word.

Lincoln's public buses do not have bike racks. Larry Worth, manager of the city's StarTran bus system, said the buses wouldn't all fit into StarTran's garage if they had racks.

In addition, he said, the city has had other funding priorities.

"There's always a money issue on these things, " Worth said.