



By Linda K. Breggin

Cities Embrace Bike Systems

Anyone who spends time in large and mid-sized cities has probably noticed the growing number of bicycle rental stations that bear catchy names such as “WE-cycle” and “Divvy.” A recent study by the Institute for Transportation & Development Policy found that over 600 cities have bike share systems and the worldwide fleet, which was negligible in 2000, has grown to over 700,000 bikes. ITDP’s Colin Hughes recently told *E&E News* that bike share systems are now “an accepted form of mass transit.”

Bike share systems vary but typically include a network of automated stations that enable users to rent bikes on a short term basis and return them to other locations. Smart phone apps, such as Spotcycle, further reduce transaction costs by providing users with information about station location and bike availability. Most systems charge an annual fee for unlimited short trips. For example, Boston’s Hubway allows unlimited rides under 30 minutes for an annual fee of \$85, but also offers a 24-hour membership at \$6.

Bike share systems in the United States are typically established by local governments, but business models vary. Many systems are run by private contractors, and some systems have corporate sponsors, such

as in New York City (Citibank) and Boston (New Balance).

The largest bike share systems in the United States — although small compared to some European and Chinese systems — include those in New York City, the District of Columbia, and Minneapolis. But cities in all parts of the country are in the game from Chattanooga to Des Moines to San Antonio.

States and localities are motivated by several factors, including the need to reduce congestion and improve air quality. A U.S. Conference of Mayors survey found that half of the mayors queried identified bike-able communities as a preferred policy initiative for addressing climate change. In fact, many cities include bike use in their climate change action plans. For example, Chicago aims to double the number of annual biking and walking trips to one million and provide a 500-mile bikeway network.

Bike share systems are reporting promising results. In D.C., according to the 2013 Capital Bikeshare Member Survey Report, the system’s 22,000 members reduced their aggregate annual car use per year by almost 4.4 million miles. Boston’s system reported 480,000 bike miles in 2012, which it estimates resulted in 160 tons of carbon offsets. Miami’s riders logged even more, a total of 8.4 million miles from spring 2011 to fall 2013. In addition, newer systems appear off to strong starts. New York’s Citi Bike averaged 36,000 trips per day after only a few months of operation and in its first eight months Nashville estimates its system reduced carbon emissions by 78 tons.

Will bike share systems meaningfully improve air quality over the long run? A National Conference of State Legislatures report asserts that “shifting just a small percent-

age of trips to bicycling or walking could significantly reduce fuel use.” For example, the report explains: “If American bicycle and foot trips increased modestly to 13 percent of trips less than three miles, annual U.S. gasoline consumption could decrease by 3.8 billion gallons annually.”

It is too early to tell whether such a goal is realistic, but studies indicate the steps states and localities should take if bicycling is to flourish on a grand scale. While bike share systems are a key component, they are popular in part because, as ITDP points out, they can be implemented quickly — in one mayoral term — unlike most transportation projects. For biking to become a significant component of state and local transportation systems, however, long range investments are needed.

NCSL identifies a range of funding mechanisms, as well as planning and biker safety laws and policies, as principal ways states can foster bicycling. Among the planning tools: state-wide bike plans; “complete streets” laws and policies that require projects to take all types of street users into account; “rails to trails” projects; and measures to connect bicycles with other forms of public transit.

Although fostering bicycling requires funding that is often scarce, states consistently spend significant amounts on transportation — most of it on roads. A Tri-State Transportation Campaign study found that on average only about 2 percent of state transportation improvement program funds are allocated to pedestrian and bike projects. It may be time for cars to start sharing not only the roads but the funding.

*Divvy,
Hubway,
and WE-cycle
— Oh My!*

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