

Some History and the Future of NYC's 2011 Bike-Share Program

In 1974 the NYC Board of Estimate authorized the construction of thousands of drafty Bus Shelters, emblazoned with ads for cigarettes. It made sense, since children, their captive audience of future customers, took the bus to school. Since the city was worried that it could not sell its bonds and pay its police officers and fire fighters, the prospect of a forest of conspicuous, shiny new public facilities, whose maintenance was paid for by somebody else and, most symbolically, which provided a new source of income for a technically bankrupt city, was manna from privatization Heaven.

The company whose concept was being peddled was French, JC DeCaux, now the largest advertising company in Europe. They realized that urban governments seldom initiate new public services and bus riders are unorganized, most often women, poor and accustomed to being ignored and it is, after all, nice to have a roof over your head. What the company was selling though, besides the shelters' ads, was themselves, and the private sector's ability to engage in commerce, such as skillfully marketing advertising, and to borrow money, and, especially, to be more efficient, to discipline their workers, to get stuff done.

Now, the same company has pioneered another piece of unattended urban street furniture, the Bike-Share Station. Using our convenience as the rationale, they utilize a long 30'-40' rectangle to make 15 or 20 bikes available. If the same bikes were most-compactly stored, they could use $\frac{1}{4}$ of that space, but that would obscure all of the ads on the bikes. (Each cycle will get $1\frac{1}{2}$ square feet according to the NYC DOT's Request for Proposal). The difficulty of locating these large stations in already congested Midtown Manhattan is clear. Regardless, the orderliness of these hi-tech implantations appeals to some, while they are disdained by others as unnecessarily oversized and intrusive.

The good news is that the Mayor has courageously taken a step to use roadways to accommodate the storage of human-scale and human-powered vehicles. He's asked to put 600 stations in midtown and lower Manhattan and wants to get it operational by April 1, 2012, with 10,000 bikes to fill the slots. The plan is to expand the system until it reaches 50,000 bikes or more. This is a terrific move, one that Paris, London, Barcelona and countless other cities around the world are making, to more fully integrate bikes into our urban landscapes. Credit is due, for finally acknowledging that the maintenance of a healthy and safe environment is one of the major reasons we have governments. Lighter-weight, non-poisonous vehicles in congested urban spaces and convenient access to more physical exercise are keys to a brighter future and it is no secret to anybody.

Some will argue that finding fault with this plan is sacrificing the good on behalf of unattainable perfection. New York City is "Bike City" though. There is nowhere, outside of the completely flat Netherlands, with as much potential to make use of the advantages that human-scale transportation affords, than here. We don't need to copy any existing methodology, we need to formulate the New York System. It can be built around what is currently planned, but can be much more ambitious:

It should connect to neighborhoods and transit facilities, parks and local institutions. It should include this city's enormous existing infrastructure of bike stores, 24-hour food stores, restaurants using bikes for deliveries, parking lots, gas stations, etc. We have an unusually large number of small-scale enterprises around the city, and plenty of big ones too, which could be part of a far more secure, truly city-wide system.

It must enable the widest diversity of designs of vehicles not the narrowest. Every qualifying bike manufacturer should be included, so that we have an opportunity to test out a variety of different styles, makers and types of vehicle. Bikes that require too many repairs will wash out of the program and the survivors will earn deserved praise and be less expensive to maintain. Companies can even be financially and otherwise responsible for maintaining their own products as a condition of participating in this process.

We can use this program to help establish the commercial viability of many of the products generated by new entrepreneurs, designers and makers, to encourage creativity and craft in the development of the next generation of human-powered and human-scale transport devices.

There are many people with different, and some with “special” needs. The ADA requires that any new program, where the technology is available, provide for the interests of these populations and expedite their access to it. The State legislature is poised to pass a law defining 1-HP electric-assist bikes as bikes, in conformity to the current Federal statute. The inclusion of electric-assist models in the mix, not currently planned, enables many accommodations to be made to various populations, from the out-of-condition to the functionally-impaired, to enable their participation in this program. Bidders for this contract have not been told to make this accommodation, instead have been urged to follow ADA regulations, without any guidance.

In addition to following the law, one goal here could even be to expand the number of users of equipment which only some, ordinarily, experience. This can benefit everyone, regardless of their current mobility status.

Without door-to-door service, (and vehicles providing weather protection) this mode will never be a real competitor for taxis, cars etc. The currently called-for large stations could often mean long walks to destinations. Not providing the convenience that those owning bikes currently enjoy undoubtedly limits the potential impact of this form of travel severely. Encountering stations without empty space and having to go further and further away from destinations to find them, will be frustrating, and the only remedy is even more bloated, and therefore unwelcome, facilities.

One means to avoid this problem is to secure many heavy chains at numerous locations where bikes would not interfere with pedestrian passage, and which could provide for non-intrusive temporary storage throughout the city, as well as a dramatic expansion of racks in the most appropriate spots. Vehicles themselves would carry their own locks as well, resulting in an optimal system, not just a big improvement over a non-existent one. Having been without one for so long, we needn't settle for a system burdened with liabilities that, some say, we have no choice but to tolerate.

While cycling is sensible de-economization, growth is what matters to most corporate and government leaders, whose success is often measured by its advance. Overcoming this historical prejudice, favoring consumption, is vital to our eventual physical and psychological survival. This program can be an important milestone in our journey to restore balance and common sense in our relationships with many other aspects of the material world as well.

The city's RFP's requirement that this be an exclusive contract will inevitably slow the proliferation of new ideas and potential for the continuous introduction of other, perhaps improved equipment. By embracing diversity and local neighborhood economic development instead, New York City can lead a worldwide renaissance in creative human-powered vehicle design. Pioneering these developments and bringing them, rapidly, into full use here, can help craft this uniquely bike-friendly terrain into an immense job incubator and art gallery, and Silicon Valley of future transportation.