

BikeShare: A Community Bicycle Lending Program

Organization

Community Bicycle Network

Status

Started 2000, ongoing

Overview

BikeShare is a bike lending program launched in 2001 by the Community Bicycle Network, a registered non-profit organization. A season pass costs \$25 or four hours of volunteer service. BikeShare pass holders can sign out a bike from one of several hubs in the downtown area, use the bike for up to three days at a time, and return it to their choice of hub. An on-line database is used to track the location and use of each bike. In 2004, the project offers 170 bikes at 14 hubs and expects to operate at its capacity of about 450 pass holders.

BikeShare equips its bikes, half of which have been donated and refurbished, with a standard set of features including bright yellow paint, a single gear and coaster brakes. Local bike shops donate some materials and services, and volunteers provide much of the labour needed to refurbish and maintain the bikes. BikeShare has a full-time coordinator and a part-time technician, and raises funds through memberships, grants and sponsorships.

BikeShare has proven that there is a market for inexpensive bike lending in Canadian cities, and is providing valuable lessons for others to follow.

Contact

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Resources

- BikeShare Web pages
(www.communitybicyclenetwork.org)

Community context

The City of Toronto is the capital of Ontario and home to 2.5 million people. It is the centre of the Greater Toronto Area, Canada's largest metropolis with a population of 5 million, and is expected to grow more than 10% by 2021.

Downtown Toronto is densely developed with commercial, residential, institutional and other land uses. It offers a strong economy and high quality of life, attributes that are partly due to a strong transit system and urban design that is supportive of both walking and cycling. In the 1970s, a community-based political reform movement raised the profile of quality-of-life issues in Toronto's downtown and nearby neighbourhoods. One legacy of several battles against road expansion projects was strong public support for cycling as an integral part of Toronto's transportation system.

Today, City of Toronto programs support cycling networks, safety, promotion and special events. The City's dynamic Cycling Committee brings together numerous stakeholders and drives many aspects of the municipal cycling agenda. In 1995, *Bicycling Magazine* named Toronto the top city for cycling in North America.

Organizational context

Several community-based organizations actively promote cycling in Toronto. One of the most important is the Community Bicycle Network (CBN), which was founded in 1993 and has over 170 regular volunteers. BikeShare, the subject of this case study, is one of CBN's many projects.

Since 1993, CBN has housed and supported a wide range of initiatives related to bicycle repair, skills development, bicycle recycling, policy development, livable streets, urban recovery, and voluntary legal and advisory support. It has run bike clubs for children in low-income neighbourhoods, a bike tool co-op, bike repair workshops by and for women, a cross-border bicycle recycling project with the City of Havana, a bike lending program, earn-and-learn workshops for survivors of domestic violence, a choir on bikes, and a cycling advocacy group.

Rationale and objectives

The goal of CBN's BikeShare is to increase cycling in Toronto by getting more bikes on the streets. Its objectives are:

- To provide the community with a fleet of bikes, stationed at hubs around the city, that grows larger as demand increases
- To make a visible and positive contribution to the image and attractiveness of cycling in Toronto
- To improve air quality and fight climate change by reducing air emissions from transportation

BikeShare was inspired by Amsterdam's 1960s-era White Bikes project, which failed because its unlocked bikes were quickly stolen or vandalized. To instill a sense of value and appreciation in its members, BikeShare decided to store its bikes securely and require an annual fee or contribution of volunteer effort from its members.



Actions

Program development. In late 2000, CBN started work on a BikeShare business plan that set key objectives and determined financial needs and possible funding sources. The business plan also explored likely BikeShare users, and established a target service area corresponding to the boundaries of the former City of Toronto (population 650,000), which is now the core of the Greater Toronto Area. The program was launched in May 2001, offering a fleet of 50 bikes at five hubs.

Bikes. By 2004, BikeShare offered a fleet of 170 bikes. About half the bikes have been donated and refurbished, and the others have been purchased with funds from sponsors. The program has negotiated a favourable deal with suppliers and is able to purchase new bikes at a discounted cost. Including assembly and accessories, BikeShare is able to put new bikes on the road for \$215 each. The bikes are equipped simply, maximizing functionality and safety while minimizing attractiveness to thieves. All bikes have a name and number, bright yellow paint, a single gear, coaster brakes, bell, basket, reflectors and a lock. Users must provide their own front light after dark, as required by law.

Hubs. By 2004, BikeShare had 14 hubs at locations including bike shops, cafés, stores, student centres, community centres and other public buildings. Hub hosts provide secure bike storage space, help pass holders pick up and drop off their bikes, enter BikeShare transaction data into the on-line database, and notify CBN of any problems with the bike fleet.

Membership. BikeShare members receive a season pass (valid from April through December) in exchange for \$25 or four hours of volunteer service with any organization. The two-page membership agreement outlines the terms of bike use, the user's indemnification of BikeShare and related parties, and what to do in case of accident. Pass holders must be competent cyclists at least 18 years of age, and are eligible for ancillary benefits including discounts at participating stores.

Borrowing process. After showing their BikeShare pass at a hub, members can borrow a bike, keep it for up to three days, and return it to any hub. The late fee for overdue bikes is \$2 per day. Members with overdue bikes receive one reminder phone call, and have their season pass cancelled after a week. Members also have their pass cancelled if they have two bikes stolen from their possession.

Administration. BikeShare uses a Web-based database to track the location and use of bikes. Staff can monitor the borrowing record and maintenance needs of each bike, identify a shortage or excess of bikes at any hub, and identify usage patterns of members such as a history of keeping bikes out past their due date. The software was developed initially by a CBN volunteer, and has been enhanced several times to add flexibility and improve reporting functions.

Promotion. BikeShare relies mainly on the advertising power of its yellow bikes. It has issued media releases to accompany major program milestones, and received some free advertising space in community and weekly newspapers.



Bikes stored at a BikeShare hub

Results

BikeShare's strong growth is summarized in the following table. In 2003, the average BikeShare member borrowed a bike more than six times and the average bike was borrowed more than 15 times. At any given time, 65% to 75% of the BikeShare fleet was in use.

Year	Hubs	Bikes	Members	Transactions
2001	5	50	175	1,150
2002	11	138	295	2,320
2003	14	169	395	2,680

BikeShare provides an excellent opportunity to evaluate the demographics of Toronto cyclists. Frequent users include doctors, lawyers and other professionals in addition to students and people with low incomes. The program intends to gather and analyze more information about its members in the future.

Participants

Community Bicycle Network (CBN). Staff hired by CBN manage BikeShare and direct bike repair and maintenance. Numerous CBN volunteers help with many aspects of the program.

Hubs. Each BikeShare hub is hosted by a business or community facility that provides staff time to help BikeShare pass holders borrow and return bikes.

Resources

The Community Bicycle Network employs a full-time BikeShare coordinator who manages day-to-day operations, and a part-time lead technician who is hired seasonally to direct bike repair and maintenance. Volunteers assist with many of these tasks. However, the program is now reaching capacity and is developing plans to add resources including a full-time lead technician.

Most of BikeShare's early costs were funded by grants, but the project's original business plan called for it to be financially self-sustaining within several years. BikeShare is moving steadily toward this goal with funding from innovative sources like bike basket advertising and the sale of naming rights for new bikes. In the future, the project may also be funded through revenues from other CBN programs.

BikeShare's principal funding sources include the following:

- Memberships — which provide about \$3,500 annually
- Toronto Atmospheric Fund — which provided \$110,000 between 1999 and 2003

- Transport Canada's Moving on Sustainable Transportation (MOST) program — which provided \$47,400 in 2001
- Other organizations — including Ontario Power Generation (which funded development of the business plan), Toronto Community Foundation, TD Friends of the Environment, Mountain Equipment Co-op and Bell Canada

Several bike stores have made in-kind contributions by supplying bike frames, parts and services like painting. Individual donors have provided bikes for refurbishing.

Timeline

Late 2000. Development of business plan

May 2001. Program launch

June 2003. Implementation of Web-based tracking system

Lessons learned

Important lessons from BikeShare's experience include:

- Community bike lending is a workable concept that, in the context of a non-governmental organization, requires determined volunteers, cheap rent and hard work.
- Using simple, low-tech bikes helps to minimize costs and reduce theft.
- A centralized bike tracking system like BikeShare's Web-based software is required to minimize confusion, especially when dealing with multiple hubs and hub hosts who may not always sign bikes out properly.
- It is advisable to deal directly and firmly with the few problem members who persist in keeping borrowed bikes past their promised return date.
- Local bike shops can be willing to provide frames and other bike parts, and municipal governments are likely to be supportive.
- Potential funders may be concerned by the possibility of bike theft and vandalism (such as that experienced by Amsterdam's White Bike project, which lost 90% of its fleet within a year). These concerns can be overcome by adopting a membership-based lending process and storing bikes securely. In BikeShare's first year, seven bikes were permanently lost to theft while locked improperly. Others were stolen, but recovered with help of observant bike messengers.
- Bike lending programs are interesting "good news" stories that generate media interest. BikeShare received extensive coverage in Toronto and across Canada.

Next steps

BikeShare aims to add four hubs and increase its membership by 20% in 2004. The program is reaching the capacity of its current resources, and has created a focus group to identify the opportunities and challenges posed by expansion.

One future goal is to strengthen links with Toronto's transit system, and BikeShare has approached the Toronto Transit Commission with the idea of locating hubs at subway stations. The groups are seeking ways to overcome challenges related to property and labour issues, and the development of a smart card-based automated lending system may be part of the solution. BikeShare is also a member of a working group that is exploring the feasibility of creating "new mobility hubs" to link bike sharing, car sharing, public transit and commuter rail services in the Toronto area.

Images are courtesy of Community Bicycle Network