

Convention project to push pedals

Afterward, loaner bikes to kick-start sharing program

By Kevin Vaughan

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The 1968 Democratic National Convention may have had petal power, but the 2008 version in Denver promises to have pedal power.

Health care giant Humana is sponsoring a program that will see 1,000 bicycles in Denver that can be checked out and used during the convention, Aug. 25-28. After the convention, some of the bikes will be left behind to kick-start a permanent sharing project.

The idea is simple: provide an environmentally friendly way for delegates, staff members and even the news media to navigate the crush of people expected for the convention.

It's about more than getting people out of their cars.

"That's part of it, but it's more to help with healthy lifestyle and environment," said Humana spokeswoman Anna Hobbs-Little.

The exact details of the program are scheduled to be announced Wednesday afternoon at a news conference featuring Gov. Bill Ritter and Mayor John Hickenlooper.

Dubbed Freewheelin, the program is being sponsored by Humana with the Boulder-based group Bikes Belong. The bicycles will come from every major manufacturer in the U.S., including Trek, Specialized, Giant, Cannondale, Fuji and Raleigh.

Tim Blumenthal, head of Bikes Belong, said he could not discuss many details of the project before Wednesday's announcement. But he said his group hopes that the project will give bicycling a boost.

"Our goal is to show that bicycling for short trips in big U.S. cities can work," Blumenthal said. "We think during the convention a lot of the trips are going to be made between the Convention Center and the Pepsi Center, between hotels and both . . . and there are going to be a lot of people who want to go down on the Cherry Creek path and get some fresh air."

Humana and Bikes Belong launched a similar project in Minneapolis-St. Paul, where the Republican National Convention will be held Sept. 1-4.

As in Denver, officials in the Twin Cities hope to create a longterm bicycle sharing program out of the convention project.

Another project is getting off the ground in Washington, D.C.

SmartBikeDC requires users to pay a \$40 annual subscription and imposes a \$200 fine for any bicycle not returned within 48 hours, according to the organization's Web site.

In Denver, users will have to provide credit cards when they check out the bicycles, and they will have to return them to another kiosk set up as part of the program.

If past experience is any judge, the security is necessary. Efforts to set out free bicycles and loan them on the honor system have failed in other cities.

"Half those bikes ended up in the creek," Blumenthal said. "The other half ended up in somebody's garage."

This time around, the hope is that the bicycles will be on the streets, being used again and again, for years.

And it's not just the bicycles that will be part of the green effort. The racks where they're stored and the kiosks where they'll be checked out and returned will be solar-powered.

Two-wheel proficiency

Cities around the world are pushing bicycling as a way of commuting - and making big investments to help people do it:

* In Copenhagen, Denmark, where 36 percent of commuters bike to work, city officials plan to invest \$200 million in bicycling facilities by 2024.

* In Amsterdam, Netherlands, bicycling accounts for 55 percent of job commutes that are less than 4.7 miles from home. The city is planning to spend \$160 million on trails, parking and safety.

* In Freiburg, Germany, leaders are spending about \$1.3 million a year on cycling - and roughly 70 percent of local trips are made by bike, foot or public transit.

* Bogota, Colombia, has more than 300 kilometers of bike paths - the most for a city in the developing world.

* In Australia, the state of Victoria now requires all new large buildings to include bicycle parking and facilities such as showers and lockers.

* In Paris, the low-cost rental project Velib now includes 20,600 bicycles.

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