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Twin Cities Republican National Convention / 1,000 bikes will be ready to roll

Visitors can use free wheels to get around town

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Article Last Updated: 05/09/2008 11:08:54 PM CDT

First, we're almost guaranteed a couple of extra hours to drink in bars. And now, 1,000 bikes to get around town.

Just in time for \$4-a-gallon gasoline, that's the latest welcoming perk lined up on the red carpet for the Republican National Convention scheduled to hit St. Paul from Sept. 1-4.

St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman and Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak announced Friday that 1,000 bikes will be stationed in the Twin Cities for use by visitors and anyone else looking for a free alternative to cars to get around during the convention.

The effort is sponsored by the Humana Inc. health insurance company in conjunction with the Bikes Belong cycling advocacy group, which also plans to take 1,000 free bikes to Denver for the Democratic National Convention from Aug. 25-28.

After convention-goers go home, the program, called Freewheelin, will leave 70 bikes in the Twin Cities, along with about 10 special bike racks as a

seed for a permanent bike-sharing program in the community.

Rybak said he hopes to set up an ongoing program in Minneapolis by next spring.

And he promised that each day of the convention, he would lead a convoy of any delegates and reporters willing to pedal from Minneapolis to St. Paul's Xcel Energy Center, the convention site.

"I was speeding through the streets of Minneapolis this morning, but the good news is I was on my bike," said Rybak, an avid cyclist who said he learned this week his driver's license had been suspended since February because of a speeding ticket. Rybak said he had inadvertently miscalculated the amount he owed on the ticket and promised to pay the right amount.

Humana and Bikes Belong officials say the bike-sharing program will use custom bikes built by Trek that will be set up like an all-purpose commuter vehicle with fenders, racks, chain guards, puncture-resistant tires, a three-speed internal gear hub, and head and tail lights powered by internal hub generators.

To deter theft, the wheels of the bikes will require special tools to remove, and parts like seat posts and pedals won't be made in the standard sizes used by other bikes.

The bikes will be parked at 10 or more solar-powered, unmanned electronic kiosks and racks in Minneapolis and St. Paul. They can be checked out by swiping a credit card or using a Freewheelin key fob.

During the convention, riders can return the bikes to any other kiosk and use them for up to 24 hours at a time at no charge. Helmets and locks also will

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be available.

Participants will use a Web site to register for the program and to automatically track things like mileage and personal carbon offset.

Humana officials said they are spending \$100,000 on the program, which is modeled after a 40-bike program for company employees at its Louisville, Ky., headquarters.

Bikes Belong Executive Director Tim Blumenthal said a credit card-secured system should work a lot better than previous bike-sharing systems that depended on the honesty of users.

In 1995, for example, the Yellow Bike Coalition parked more than two dozen brightly colored yellow bikes around town for general public use. Within days, the bikes were gone or vandalized.

Cities around the country, however, are still interested in bike sharing thanks to a credit card-based system launched last summer in Paris, which now has 20,000 bikes and nearly 800 bike stations.

Funded by a public-private partnership using billboard ad revenue, Parisians can ride the bikes for free for up to 30 minutes at a time and pay a fee for longer rides. It's proved to be wildly successful, according to bike advocates.

There's nothing quite like that in place now in the U.S., but Washington, D.C., is about to launch a 120-bike program sponsored by Clear Channel using bus shelter ad revenue. The program will require users to pay a \$40 annual membership fee to use bikes for up to three hours at a time for free.

Arlington, Va., hopes to have a 100- to 200-bike system in place this fall. Registered users will be sent access code numbers to their cell phones that

will allow them to unlock bikes from special racks, according to Washington bike-sharing consultant Paul DeMaio, who helped work on the program.

Other cities, including New York, Chicago, Boston, Seattle, San Francisco, Philadelphia and Portland, are looking into the idea, hoping to imitate the Parisian initiative to reduce auto pollution and traffic and boost public health, according to DeMaio, who also operates bike-sharing.blogspot.com. Blumenthal estimated a successful ongoing bike-sharing program in the Twin Cities would require 200 to 300 bikes in St. Paul and about 500 in Minneapolis. The capital investment would be about \$1,500 to \$2,000 per bike, he said.

"It's cheap, but it's not free," he said of a bike-based transportation system.

About 30 percent of bike-sharing use in Paris happens late at night, after regular public transportation systems offer limited or no service, Blumenthal said.

Convention-goers may find late-night bike rides handy here as well. Thanks to recently passed legislation, bars in the Twin Cities may be able to stay open until 4 a.m. during the event.

"I don't think it's going to be one type of person who is going to be drawn to this," said Blumenthal of the estimated 45,000 visitors expected for the convention. "People have this notion that it's fat, cigar-chomping lobbyists."

And there may be another bike-sharing program in the works for the convention.

According to a posting to a Yahoo e-mail group, a protest group called the RNC Welcoming Committee is asking for people in the Twin Cities to donate old bikes for the group to use during the convention.

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The group has a goal of 500 donated bikes and has proposed to set up a community bike-sharing program after the convention, according to the posting, which is not signed by an individual.

"We all know that this war in Iraq is driven by the Republicans' love for oil. We want to make a powerful statement against their oil war through making hundreds of bikes available to out of town protestors who are coming to our cities for the RNC," according to the posting. "Republicans hate bikes; we love them!"

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