

Freedom rides during the RNC—and beyond



Paris bikes Caption: Bikes await riders at racks controlled by an electronic kiosk in the heart of Paris. Bike advocate Steve Clark, from Transit for Livable Communities, said Paris' free bike program 'is the model' for a sustained, public bike-share project in the Twin Cities. Photo by Jeremy Stratton

BY JEREMY STRATTON , [TC DAILY PLANET](#)
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This September, Minneapolis and St. Paul will boast the largest public bike-sharing program in the nation — for four days. Could the convention's free bikes be a preview of public bicycle-sharing in the Twin Cities?

Concurrent with the Republican National Convention, September 1–4, health insurance company Humana and the bicycle advocacy non-profit Bikes Belong will make 1,000 bicycles available to the public as part of their "Freewheelin'" program. The groups will do the same for the Democratic National Convention, Aug. 25–28, in Denver.

Once the party is over, however, the Republicans and Freewheelin' will go away, leaving behind 70 bikes, a small seed that Minneapolis hopes to plant this fall with a "bike-share" pilot program that is just starting to take shape. While St. Paul is farther behind than its western neighbor in terms of bike infrastructure, that city is also looking ahead — well beyond the RNC — at how to improve the city for cyclists.

Freewheelin' with the Republicans

The 1,000 bicycles, donated by a handful of manufacturers, will be placed at seven different kiosks: in Minneapolis, at the Government Plaza between City Hall and the Hennepin County Government Center; in Loring Park; near the convention center; and near the west end of the

The anti-RNC bike program by Jeremy Stratton

Freewheelin' is not the only community bike program gearing up for the RNC. Arise! Bookstore has kicked off an effort — specifically geared towards "RNC Resisters" — through donated bikes will be

Stone Arch Bridge.

In St. Paul, kiosks will be at Upper Landing Park — just blocks from the Xcel Center — Indian Mounds Park and Crosby Farm. (A map is available at the [Freewheelin' website: www.freewheelinwaytogo.com](http://www.freewheelinwaytogo.com).)

Anyone 18 or older with a credit card and an ID can register online, or at one of the green-colored, solar-powered kiosks, and then “check out” a bike between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. (possibly later at some sites and times). Volunteers will be on hand at the stations to assist and hand out maps and helmets. In addition, “travel guides” will lead group rides for those less familiar with the cities, according to the website.

After the convention, registered riders can tally their miles ridden, calories burned and even their carbon offset, said Jim Turner, spokesperson for Humana, which started a similar program for its employees in Louisville. Turner touted the benefits of the free bikes, including the health of individuals and the planet alike.

“As a health benefits company, focused on sustainability, it works for us for a lot of different reasons,” Turner said.

Though Humana’s early intention for the bikes focused on the convention and its delegates, security around the convention has changed that.

“We were kind of handcuffed by the security perimeters,” said Eric Thompson, program coordinator for St. Paul Parks and Recreation. The idea of the St. Paul locations, he said, is less about transportation to and from the convention, and more “so people can make connections to our trails and streets with bike lanes,” and to highlight areas where bike transit funding either newly exists or is needed.

After the RNC

While both cities and Humana will share the free-bike publicity during the convention, the two cities diverge in their respective efforts towards sustained bike-sharing afterwards. While Minneapolis is already setting up a pilot project, St. Paul has no detailed plans right now.

John Munger, executive director of the City of Lakes Nordic Ski Foundation (which runs the annual City of Lakes Loppet race) said his organization is currently working with the City of Minneapolis on a pilot project for this fall, through which city employees will have access to 30 bicycles in three Downtown locations (likely City Hall, the convention center and the Crown Roller Mill).

The hope is that the pilot will lead to broader implementation, likely focusing on Downtown, Uptown and the University areas. “The bigger chunk is trying to make a real bike-share happen in Minneapolis by next May,” said Munger. “In order to have things be anything beyond recreational, we’ll have to have an advanced network,” he said.

Munger said the Freewheelin’ project may be more of a psychological springboard than an infrastructural base for a long-term program. “Bringing those 1,000 bikes will capture the imagination of the city,” he said. “Whether those bikes end up being part of the system is an open question.”

Another open question is funding. City of Minneapolis Transportation Planner Don Pflaum said the mayor’s office has “taken a strong lead” and is looking at innovative ways to fund a program. Sources could include collaboration among city departments, private businesses and non-profits such as St. Paul-based [Transit for Livable Communities \(TLC\)](#), which expects to receive a funding proposal from Munger’s group.

Pflaum said that the bikes “will have a lot of value to a lot of people,” from tourists to professionals running a work errand. “There’s potential for hundreds of bikers throughout city to be using something like this,” he said.

“The whole idea is for people to use bikes for short trips for utilitarian purposes,” said Clark, Steve Clark, walking and bicycling program manager for TLC. To

implement it, Clark said Minneapolis should look across the pond — to France.

'Paris is the model'

The Freewheelin' program follows the 21st century model exemplified best by the "velib" program — a conjunction of the French words *velo* (bike) and *liberte* (freedom) — that has transformed the streets of Paris. The thousands of bikes are visible everywhere in the city, whether locked at the ubiquitous electronic racks or gliding through Paris traffic, often along bus lanes widened to facilitate the increase in two-wheel transit.

Film and video producer Greg Panteix, who lives with his partner and two children on the hilltop neighborhood of Montmartre, said he sold his car as a direct result of the free bike program.

This is not the old "yellow bike" program, which several people interviewed for this story agreed was a failure in the Twin Cities and beyond. "By now, all of them have disappeared, and that's what happened in every city," said Clark.

The newer models have a safety provision to keep the program going: if you don't return your Freewheelin' bike to any of the seven kiosks, for example, you'll find a \$600 charge on your credit card.

While Washington D.C. launched the nation's first public free bike program (with 120 bikes) this summer, the U.S. lags behind Europe, where several cities have implemented successful programs. For any future Twin Cities project, "Paris is the model," said Clark, emphasizing that the French success went beyond bringing in bikes and kiosks.

"At the same time [Paris] did that, they made infrastructure improvements, they had policy changes; they basically opened up many corridors," said Clark. Strategies included making the right lanes on many downtown streets wider bus- and bike-only lanes, and adding "contra-flow" lanes with barriers between bikers and oncoming traffic in next lane.

"The whole strategy is to favor pedestrian and bicycle transport, so you give bicycles and pedestrian advantages over motorists," Clark continued. "You give them shortcuts. On a one-way street, you allow two-way for bicycles. You provide as much space as you can." He applauded Copenhagen, "where transportation planners acknowledge that bicycling is a social activity, so they want to have bike lanes wide enough to accommodate bicycles two abreast, with room for third to pass."

Clark said that these kinds of bicycle-friendly policies and facilities will need to be implemented if a bike-share program is to succeed in Minneapolis. "I think somebody will have to say, 'Yeah, this has become a priority. We're going to make Downtown as bicycle-friendly as possible.'" Even with all the recent and coming improvements in Minneapolis — many on the horizon through the Bike/Walk Twin Cities program, for which TLC administers federal pilot project funds to the municipalities — Clark said progress could be accelerated in Minneapolis.

"What's being neglected, in my mind, is the concept of routine accommodation," he said. "Whenever a street is being improved, they should automatically re-stripe it to include a bike lane," he said as one example.

Downtown St. Paul, with its narrow streets, is further behind Minneapolis, Clark said. Thompson said Mayor Chris Coleman supports the idea of a "legacy program" and is willing to talk about what's needed to make it happen, but there are no specific plans for after the RNC.

Thompson admitted that his city is trailing its twin, but it's not for a lack of interest.

"People generally say St. Paul is lagging behind," he said. "We are, but it's not because we don't share the same enthusiasm Minneapolis does. Our issue is that St. Paul is designed differently than Minneapolis. We don't have a chain-of-lakes infrastructure that can be the hub of bike routes to spoke out from. It's more complicated in St. Paul."

One bright spot on the horizon is a proposal to hire a full-time bicycle coordinator for St. Paul — something Minneapolis already has in Pflaum, Thompson noted. "You need a full-time bike coordinator to take on projects like this," he said. "St. Paul doesn't have it yet."

Jeremy Stratton, editor of The Bridge, observed the Paris bike program while visiting there, and is an enthusiastic Minneapolis bicyclist.

Article Tags: [bicycles](#), [bikes](#), [Both](#), [convention](#), [Paris](#), [RNC 2008](#), [Transportation](#)

Anonymous's picture

[Saint Paul/Minneapolis is](#)

Submitted by Anonymous (not verified) on Sun, 08/24/2008 - 23:47.

Saint Paul/Minneapolis is not Paris. The climate and infrastructure are very different. Mr. Thompson and his friends have been trying to get

grants for years to implement their personal agendas. There is a reason that most of these grant applications have failed. This is just another example of a vested interest trying to spend scarce public monies.

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ChaCha Rabbit's picture

[Two Green Wheels--or, To Green Wheels](#)

Submitted by ChaCha Rabbit (not verified) on Sun, 08/31/2008 - 01:25.

Let us move forward with all of the sound public transit ideas we can. The public bike idea has a beautiful sound.

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