



Free and Easy

Tim Blumenthal hopes Bikes Belong at the DNC.

By Joel Warner

Published: April 24, 2008

Tim Blumenthal, executive director of Bikes Belong, a Boulder-based bicycle-advocacy group, has a dream for the Democratic National Convention, and it's a big one: "I imagine *Newsweek* or *Time*, and on the magazine's first photo spread of the convention, you see a sea of cyclists pedaling on the Cherry Creek path with the convention center in the background."

That dream may be close to reality.

Working with the Denver 2008 Convention Host Committee, Bikes Belong is now putting the finishing touches on a plan to send 1,000 bikes out onto Denver's streets during the convention, all free for public use. "A lot of this was serendipity and a convergence of people's ideas," says Parry Burnap, the Host Committee's director of greening. "Bikes Belong's vision is that bikes be regarded around the country no longer as just a toy or recreational activity, but as a serious solution to some very big challenges, like climate and congestion and obesity and quality of life."



Thanks to the bike-industry leaders behind Bikes Belong, all 1,000 of the \$500 bikes have been lined up, along with another 1,000 bikes for an identical program that the group is organizing for the Republican National Convention in St. Paul, Minnesota. As Blumenthal puts it, "We're bike-partisan."

Denver has tried free bikes before. In the mid-'90s, several dozen bicycles were let loose in Denver courtesy of the Cheker Bike Program, but the project foundered after many of them disappeared. Similar programs around the country "usually haven't gone very well because a lot of bikes ended up in garages or in the creek," says Blumenthal. "The thing about this is that it will be controlled access." Specifically, the bikes will be available at six to twelve checkout stations at key locations around the city, and hundreds of volunteers will make sure that the bikes are distributed evenly among the stations and kept in working order. If a bike isn't returned to a station, the rider will end up paying for it — although how that will work has yet to be determined. Nor have organizers nailed down the necessary liability insurance.

Still, they're already envisioning an ongoing Denver bike-rental program once the convention ends, similar to the Vélib' system in Paris that involves 20,000 rental bikes. "We want Denver to be one of the first U.S. cities to implement this kind of permanent system," says Blumenthal, who hints there could be a major announcement coming in the next few weeks. "To get that in place, we are going to need some top-notch sponsors who are willing to invest in it. Any way you cut it, it's going to cost a couple thousand dollars a bike by the time you add in all the elements to do it right: solar-powered checkout stations, credit-card checkout systems, a good website to track bike availability."

And before that, they need to make the convention project work. Could delegates and other visiting VIPs be too worried about sweating in the August heat or messing up their hair to use the bikes? "They are now talking about 50,000 people total at the convention," Blumenthal points out. "I think there will be enough people who will say, 'I can do this.'" And it helps that most rides should be easy, one- to two-mile trips across Denver's thankfully flat downtown. "If the convention was in the Highlands or Golden or Lakewood," he admits, "I would be more concerned."