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MAGAZINE

## Bikes Belong in Politics

A Boulderite's Plan to Get DNC Politicos Cycling

by J.C. O'Connell, photo by Jim Post



From his second-story office just off the Pearl Street Mall, Tim Blumenthal has a stunning view of the Flatirons, but rather than peer up into the mountains, the executive director of Bikes Belong sees real beauty below on 13th Street.

The former two-way street has been divvied between motorists heading one way, and cyclists cruising the opposite direction through a bike lane protected from traffic by cement planters.

Thousands of cyclists pass his office every day.

Boulder is a bike-friendly town, to say the least.

And Blumenthal has big dreams of bringing that same sight to Denver during the Democratic National Convention in August.

He's planning the unprecedented—at least in Colorado—bringing 1,000 bikes to the political event in an effort to offer free rides to the expected 50,000 visitors.

"Our vision, our goal is that when you pick up Newsweek magazine or Time and the cover shows the Democratic National Convention and a picture of Obama or Hillary...but when you open it up, inside, there'll be a big photo of a sea of people riding bikes," Blumenthal says.

If you provide the bikes, Blumenthal's logic goes, people will pedal, and perhaps keep pedaling well after the Democrats have chosen their presidential nominee.

The plan is complicated, but Blumenthal, whose organization is always working to put more butts on bicycles seats, has a lot of enthusiastic supporters and partners including the Democratic National Committee, the city of Denver and a number of pro-cycling non profits.

"What's cool about it is that it's really going to showcase how important bicycling is in Colorado on a national stage," says Dan Grunig, Bicycle Colorado executive director.

Blumenthal thinks he can get manufacturers to donate the bicycles, which means the half-million-dollar-plus cost of bringing the bikes to the convention is the least of his worries.

Instead, as recently as late March, Blumenthal was still juggling possible solutions to myriad problematic details—avoiding 50,000 potential lawsuits, for example.

Organizers also have to find up to 20 bicycle stations, factoring in security and safe bike routes through traffic more hectic than the race to the Oval Office. Ensuring the bikes actually get returned and who will have access to the free program are other issues.

Ideally, Blumenthal would like to offer the bikes to the general public but logistics may keep the program limited to those registered for the convention. That'll make clearing the biggest hurdle, insurance, a little easier to figure out.

If these issues can be cleared without too many folks going face first over his or her handlebars, this effort could be a part of a lofty goal: Making it the greenest convention ever.

The program would be simple: a rider would approach a kiosk, show ID, and be handed a bike, lock and helmet at no charge with instructions to not keep the free gear too long—sharing is good.

“Our goal is not only to have a 1,000 bikes at the convention, but to play a part in a legacy for the city,” Blumenthal says.

Loaning bikes as public transportation on such a large scale may be a foreign idea for Coloradoans, but many Europeans can find bikes at little or no cost for short trips around city streets.

Paris' fleet of 20,000 bikes inspired locals and tourists to take 11 million bicycle trips through the City of Lights in just six months.

Those are the kind of numbers Blumenthal would love to see in Denver. But you have to take the training wheels off before you're commuting 10 miles a day to your office. So when the convention wraps and all those delegates and reporters return to their respective states in late August, a few hundred of the bikes will likely remain stationed around Denver for public use.

Will Handsfield, president of Bikes Denver, gets the feeling that Bikes Belong will leave more than a few treadmarks in Denver, helping move the city toward a year-round established program.

“If it can work anywhere, it can work here,” says Handsfield, who usually beats his car-reliant buddies to the bar by bike.

But Blumenthal isn't stopping at the state line.

After the political excitement in Colorado comes to a close, Bikes Belong plans to host a similar free-bike program at the Republican National Convention.

Although Democratic riders shouldn't bother plastering their handlebars with Obama or Hillary bumper stickers, or trying to paint the cycles blue, because an entirely different set of donated bikes will be used for the Republican party.

That doesn't mean Colorado won't get a chance to send a message; perhaps the pilot program will establish that groundbreaking precedent that Blumenthal hopes for as he watches bikers whiz by his Boulder office.

"In the United States, there are a lot of really big recreational bike rides," Blumenthal says, buzzing with the energy that comes with riding his bike everywhere. "But a bike loan system, short-term on this scale has never been attempted. But we'll be successful, because we have to be: We'll do whatever it takes."

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[104th North](#), [Boulder](#), [politics](#)

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