

Bloomberg's Bike-Share Program Locked in Debate

By Rory Crump on September 1, 2011

As New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg reaches for his green pen, opponents of his bike-share program make a short line outside his office protesting the soon-to-be-awarded vendor contract for placing card-operated kiosks throughout the city. Gotham pundits peg the contract signing as a prophetic victory in Bloomberg's fight for an eco-friendly New York. But a notorious minority wants the program DOA. With other metro success stories to benchmark, the head-scratching bike debate seems more about zealous politics than carbon freedom.

With a 66-percent approval rating from adult New Yorkers, bike-share support is a latent reaction to the flood of cyclists unleashed on New York since 2005. Almost doubling in volume, both commuters and recreationists ushered in a biking renaissance hatched from 200 bike-lane miles installed by NYC's Department of Transportation. The initial project was completed in 2009 and Bloomberg's master plan will blaze a combined 1,800 miles by 2030.

The New York City Health Department claims over half-a-million New Yorkers are now pedaling. And DOT has instituted programs, including free helmets, to boost the phenomenon. Sitting on piles of research, DOT is committed to a more primitive future for NYC transportation, convinced the biking trend is not another New Yorker indulgence. Dissenting voices claim DOT is steamrolling Bloomberg's bike agenda through less enthusiastic neighborhoods, and the bike-share program spells disaster for both public safety and motor vehicle access.

Bloomberg's green machine is well-equipped and built for speed. DOT Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan is an awareness guru, quick with supporting data on the virtues of the NYC bike plan. Both DOT and advocacy groups like Transportation Alternatives work to flatten arguments surrounding the wisdom of attracting amateurs to cheap, accessible bikes intended to satisfy New Yorkers' travel needs, usually three miles or less.

The collective cite the "safety in numbers" theory to ease the notion of pitting raw cycling technique vs. angry New York taxi. Helmet laws? DOT promotes helmet safety and, in weaker moments, yields to the no-helmet law. The infamous "Don't Be a Jerk" campaign, featuring celebrity cyclists, was launched to establish the basic rules of the road and warn against erratic behavior and nonchalance, native to rookie operators.

With an uneven grid dominating mid-to-lower Manhattan, certain neighborhoods have cried out, refusing to surrender what is left of their Lilliputian side streets. According to the mayor's office, community boards have been pulled into the bigger bike discussion.

Taxpayers don't have a gripe. The bike-share program will not cost the city a dime, entirely funded by user fees and advertisement. The city even stands to make a few bucks on the deal. Yes, the Public Design Commission must sign off on anything chewing up public property, but civic sentiment seems to favor more bike racks.

What about those vendors? An erroneous New York Time's article questioned the financial viability of Alta Bicycle Share, one of the two vendors reportedly left in the running. Alta refuted the accusation, and the paper printed a retraction. B-Cycle, partly owned by Trek, has bike-share experience in Denver and Chicago. Reach, bankroll and sophistication are a must. And the DOT RFP "calls for a system that uses the latest technologies to prevent theft, which has been virtually non-existent in the newest bike share systems in London and Washington DC."

But as the bidders sharpen their proposals, the masses have been resigned to ringside seats for a pillow fight between both NYC media groups and political factions. The greater question is what are they fighting about: sidewalks, money or power?

The mess appears untidy in light of the facts. New Yorkers have embraced the bike lanes as a supplement to a robust, but crowded public transportation system. The bike-share program is a natural extension, targeting workers, residents and tourists within a strategic network of existing transportation hubs and underserved parts of the five boroughs.

DOT's press release announcing the bike-share RFP places the burden of any incremental costs on the shoulders of the winning bidder. "The RFP calls for a private company to bear all the cost and responsibilities for the system during an initial five-year period while sharing revenues with the city, and with no taxpayer funds being used for the system's implementation, upkeep or maintenance."

From Barcelona to Denver, DOT - actually not taking credit for the brainchild - tips their hat to other bike-share programs, claiming first-movers have worked out both the administrative and criminal kinks and project a safe landing for the NYC pilot. Make a privatized system work here, and you can make it work anywhere. The reverb bouncing from a successful NYC bike-share program would, presumably, nudge other metro areas into paving bike lanes and loading them with generic cruisers.

Bikes are cool and all, but what about bigger savings? The British Medical Journal reported Barcelona's bike-share program saves a dosage of 9,000 tons of carbon dioxide from entering the atmosphere.

Everybody wins. A two-handed slam over congestion, confinement and carbon...right? Uproar from both the courts and media suggest a "bike backlash" is in play, ceremoniously rooted in politics, or more specifically, political agendas.

The feathery debate reeks of a four-year ramp to a presidential election because the pilot program, dropping 600 bike stations housing 10,000 bikes south of 60th Street in Manhattan, has been delayed until mid-2012. Guilty before proven innocent, the program has already proven contentious.

Initial concerns loomed over whether New Yorkers could share or not. Paris, home to Bloomberg's bike-share epiphany, ran a well-publicized, 100-percent-off sale on all bikes and accessories - bikes were flying off the racks and never coming back. The majority of the original fleet were stolen, vandalized or abandoned. NYC's privatized approach theoretically wipes the city's hands clean of tracking and replacing missing bikes.

NYC's community boards carry a small, but stealthy hammer, more concerned with racks swallowing sidewalks or bikes tangling with traffic. Bending to both the cultish appeal and common sense of the biking craze, most resident groups just want a seat at the table. In response to the

community-board buzz, the mayor's office issued a PR-scented memo summarizing the benefits of the city's bike plan and squashing claims individual boards have been left out.

The Prospect Park West bike lane, a popular Brooklyn jaunt, has been at the center of community controversy. Two well-connected groups brought suit against NYC, claiming the city bulldozed the bike-lane project into the neighborhood with jagged statistics painting a deceptive picture of the project. A Brooklyn judge recently dismissed the charges, but the suit was unprecedented and hints at future legal road bumps for Bloomberg's plan.

Moving up the food chain, political upstarts targeting Gracie Mansion have taken shots at Bloomberg's bike agenda. Whether stealing a slow news day or low-hanging fruit, two past mayoral hopefuls - including the exposed Anthony Weiner - vowed to torch racks, lanes, and everything in between. Advocates in Bloomberg's bike camp shrug off the posturing. The nascent DOT programs, both bike lanes and bike sharing, are fresh meat for opportunists avoiding Gotham's bigger issues.

Political wrangling aside, New Yorkers are taking back the streets of New York on two wheels. Salute the winning bike-share bid and support the program because Michael Bloomberg - with the power of the green pen - is putting his vision of both increased mobility and sustainable growth into a higher gear.