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Is Boston Ready For a Revolution?

Can Boston really go from being the worst city for bicycling to the best? The mayor and his spitfire bike czar think so, and they're determined to launch the biggest bike-share program in the country. But as one visit to Paris reveals, bike share is about more than cool racks and shiny two-wheelers.

By Tom Matlack | April 12, 2009

I leave for Paris in a blizzard. On Air France, I try to sleep. But I keep having the same nightmare. I'm biking to work down Beacon Street, going as fast as I can. I pedal harder and harder, weaving in and out. But it's no use. No matter how fast I go, Mayor Menino, taking a detour from his Hyde Park-to-City Hall commute, keeps overtaking me on his shiny new Trek, laughing heartily as he passes by.

I'm visiting Paris to see how its new bike-sharing program has transformed and energized the city. Boston is exploring the idea, and while plenty of bike fanatics and clean-air enthusiasts are ecstatic, a lot of others think it's lunacy, given that our street system is a mess, our drivers are maniacs, and our weather isn't exactly ideal for biking. The essence of bike share is self-service, so I plan to tour Paris on my borrowed bike with a map and my American Express card. The Louvre, Notre Dame, Eiffel Tower, Pompidou Center, and Hermes are on my short list. I don't plan to actually go into these places (except Hermes, to buy a scarf for my wife, Elena, so I don't have to sleep on the couch after returning from my trip to Paris without her). I do plan on circling each site, to take in the bike's-eye view and, in the process, see if bike share just might work in Boston.

Thomas Valeau runs the Paris bike-share program Velib for JCDecaux, which is the second largest outdoor advertising company in the world, behind Clear Channel. Decaux is known for installing street furniture -- benches, shelters, and the like -- in cities (including Boston) and selling advertising space on it. Bertrand Delanoë, the charismatic mayor of Paris, hired Decaux and Valeau to launch Velib (the name combines the words *velo*, or bike, and *liberte*, or freedom) in July 2007. In return for a long-term contract with the city for outdoor furniture advertising, Decaux agreed to build and operate the bike program for free, turning over user fees to the city.

When I arrive, Paris is having a rare cold snap and there's a dusting of snow. Valeau -- the self-proclaimed "Monsieur Velo" of Paris -- is a short, dark-haired man dressed in a tight pin-striped suit, nondescript tie, and flowing brown scarf. He dashes across a busy street to shake my hand at the Velib station in front of City Hall. Even as I'm trying to keep my legs from shaking in the cold, a steady stream of undeterred commuters rides by on Velib bikes. A technician works over the bicycles in the station's racks, making any repairs.

We walk up to the brightly colored electronic kiosk -- Barney purple is on everything Velib -- and Valeau asks me to insert my Amex card. The kiosk, racks, and automated locks are connected electrically to the rest of the Velib system. On a screen display, I request a one-day pass and am charged 1 euro. In less than a minute, I've gotten an official Velib member number. The screen then shows a diagram of bikes at the station, noting which are available.

I walk down to get my bike. A green light blinks, telling me to pull it out of the locking system. As I settle into a comfortable saddle, Valeau explains the Velib design -- safe, sturdy, easy to ride, and hopefully less likely to be stolen. The bike is sleek, with the cables hidden inside the steel tubing. There's a reinforced basket up

front, "for boys carrying their girlfriends around town," Valeau says. But the rear fender is designed to give way and stop the bike if someone tries to ride on the back. There are front and back safety lights, a three-gear shifter, a bell, and a bike lock that's permanently attached to the basket.

I ride down the block. The bike is heavy but handles well. Valeau waves me back. We put the bike in the rack, inserting the thick metal tongue attached to the front wheel into a lock slot. A light blinks yellow, beeps, turns green. "We're all set," Valeau says. "Velib knows that you've returned your bike. We know where all 20,000 bikes are all the time." With that, he motions me to a nearby cafe, commenting on the cold and saying it's time for coffee. He also digs into his chest pocket for a pack of unfiltered Camels. On our hundred-yard walk to my sixth espresso of the day, Mr. Bicycle puffs away.

Boston is a different city on a bike. As the fresh air hits your face, you see things you would miss from a car: the sun reflecting off a historic church steeple; an old lady who wears a different, outrageous hat every day; intricately carved brownstone doorways. If you look closely, it doesn't feel like New York or Chicago or Los Angeles. I always swear I must be in London or Paris. No other American city has the history and architecture and grandeur of ours, and it's best seen on two wheels.

But there is one problem with taking in the views while pedaling along -- you might get killed. Riding a bike in Boston traffic requires a fundamental decision: Play it safe or go for broke. My strategy has always been to go the same speed as the cars and try to intimidate automobile commuters. It's only a mile down Beacon and then Commonwealth Avenue from my house in Coolidge Corner to my office on Newbury Street, but on a bike it's treacherous. There are no bike paths on those streets, and morning commuters are testy. I once saw a scrawny bike messenger get into a game of chicken with a cabbie. It didn't end well. The two men screamed at each other, nose to nose, on the corner of Commonwealth and Dartmouth. Then the messenger landed one decisive blow to the chin of the chubby cabdriver before getting back on his bike and riding off.

Mayor Menino commutes to work on his bike some days. He's convinced Boston can be transformed by a sustained effort to get citizens out of cars and onto bikes. He is not alone. "Bike share would allow non-riders to get on a bike with a very minimal change to their lifestyle," says David Watson, executive director of the Massachusetts Bicycle Coalition. "Forty percent of car trips are within 2 miles of home. If bike share helps us shift just a small percentage of those trips to bikes, it will have a huge impact on our citizens' health, on the environment, and the vitality of our community."

Rob Vandermark is the founder and CEO of Seven Cycles in Watertown, the nation's largest custom manufacturer of titanium and carbon-fiber bikes. Seven is actually following in the tread marks of companies like Overman Wheel and Pope Manufacturing, founded here in the 19th century, that made New England the American epicenter of bike manufacturers. "Boston has always maintained a strong bike culture," says Vandermark, "and it's encouraging to see institutions develop to make bicycles part of the fabric of the city. Bike-share programs provide the accessibility needed for riding to become more commonplace."

Perhaps sensing momentum -- or maybe just sick of seeing *Bicycling* magazine routinely label his city the worst in the country for biking -- Menino in 2007 hired Nicole Freedman, a Stanford graduate and former Olympic cyclist, as his bike "czar." She began slowly, first by expanding the one-day Hub on Wheels event as well as putting more bike racks and paths in place. But Freedman, 36, has also turned her attention to the big prize: becoming the first American city to implement a large-scale bike-share program like the ones in European cities, most notably Paris.

There are 20,600 bikes spread out across 1,450 bike stations in Paris, in prominent locations, no more than 300 meters apart. Velib membership costs 1 euro for a day pass or 29 for a year. Parisians have fallen in love with Velib. On an average day, there are 200,000 rides, meaning that each bike gets used about 10 times. There are contests to see who can paint a Velib bicycle most beautifully, and bike stations have become

popular spots to find a date.

James Houghton, a venture capitalist and longtime Beacon Hill resident, happened to take his family to Paris for a sabbatical just as Velib was being launched. "I was not much of a biker before we went to Paris, but the Velib was one of the highlights of our year," he says. "It was a great way to get around." When his family returned home, he says, he started riding everywhere and became a convert to the joys of the bike commute. "The main difference is that the culture in Paris is now much more bike-friendly. Boston may have a little work to do on that front, but I have no doubt that a well-run bike-share program would not only work well here but could help transform the city."

In Boston, Freedman has proven adept not only at convincing Menino that a bike-share program would be a catalyst for good, but in building a coalition among Boston's neighborhoods, planning and architectural boards, adjacent municipalities, and universities. Last year, she issued a request for information on bike share and received 12 responses from potential operators. Working under the umbrella of the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, she issued a formal request for a proposal in February for Boston, in concert with Brookline, Cambridge, and Somerville, and Harvard, MIT, Boston University, Northeastern, and UMass-Boston. Freedman and the planning council expect to have a vendor selected by June, and, if financing can be worked out, a full-scale program rolled out by spring of next year, unveiling thousands of bikes all over the area. What she doesn't know is how many people will ride them.

Valeau takes me to the Seine to tour Decaux's floating workshop. The barge starts at the Eiffel Tower each morning and makes one trip up and down each side of the river, dropping off fixed bikes and picking up broken ones at 12 locked cages. Vandalism and thefts have become a growing concern, and some Velib bikes from Paris have even popped up in other countries. All told, among the score of repair facilities (the others are housed in garages around the city), mechanics fix 600 bikes a day. "If we stopped maintenance, there would be no bicycles after 10 days," Valeau says, "so this is very, very important to our overall operation."

Velib has 162,000 long-term members, Valeau tells me, and has sold 4 million short-term tickets. In 18 months, Velib users have made more than 41 million trips. The first half-hour of a trip is free, to promote commuting rather than touring; only 4 percent of trips are for longer than a half-hour. "All the revenues go to the city," Valeau says. "The city is earning almost 9 million euros a year from Velib customers."

I ask Valeau his advice for Boston. "The first key is the density of the network," he says. "It must cover the whole city, not just the city center, with a station every 250 meters. The second key is you must have good prices -- very, very cheap. The third key is the promotion of the service -- the city must be very politically involved and committed to its success. The fourth key is the quality of the bicycles and the station equipment. They will be used 10 times a day by different customers: novice, expert, fat, very slim, tall, and short. Last but perhaps most important is the quality of service and repair."

After I leave Valeau, I ride -- under the Eiffel Tower, down the Champs-Élysées, around the Arc de Triomphe (where oncoming traffic even waits for me to pass), and all the way to Notre Dame. Bike paths are clearly marked and in some places, like along the Seine, quite dramatic. Many intersections have separate traffic-light systems for bikes. At Notre Dame, I put my bike away at a nearby station and wander in just as the cardinal of Paris is saying Mass in his green vestments. Afterward, I stop in a Left Bank cafe for hot chocolate, onion soup, and a croque-monsieur. Refueled, I grab another Velib bike and ride back toward my hotel at dusk, taking a detour to check out the Louvre on the way.

The success of Velib has created a ripple effect across Europe. There are bike-share programs not just throughout France, but also in Pamplona and Barcelona, Spain, in Milan and London, in Norway and Sweden.

In North America, Montreal is leading the way with its ultramodern Bixi program launched this spring. Bixi (a

combination of "bicycle" and "taxi") is a self-sustaining program that won't rely on outside funding, whether from advertising or public sources. The Montreal parking authority put up \$15 million to design and build the system and hopes to recover the money through user fees.

In the United States, there are pilot programs already in place in Washington, D.C., Louisville, Kentucky, and Chicago, and there's a mad rush to be the first city with a major Paris-like program. New York and Chicago are moving fast, but no one is talking about a regional program that includes surrounding cities and towns in a unified plan of the magnitude of Boston's. A growing industry has emerged to support the bike-share revolution, as evidenced by the 12 respondents to Boston's request for information: The major players are companies that specialize in outdoor advertising, mass transit, and healthcare -- each of which sees a direct and indirect benefit to being the provider of bike share.

One of those players is Spain's Cemusa, a municipal-services provider with \$19 billion in revenues worldwide. Like Decaux, Cemusa has a large outdoor advertising business that includes a contract with the MBTA. The money at stake is huge. Cemusa's 20-year deal with New York City -- which includes 3,300 bus shelters, 330 newsstands, and 20 automatic toilets -- guarantees the city \$1 billion of incremental revenue. So throwing in even an extensive bike-share program, like Decaux did in Paris, to secure an ad deal is well worth it. "We've hired Giorgetto Giugiaro, who's the designer of the Lamborghini and the Maserati, to oversee the design of our system," says Mark Madden, Cemusa's North American director of business development.

Clear Channel, the largest outdoor advertising company in the world, lost the Paris bike-share contract to Decaux. Since then, Clear Channel has implemented 15 systems in Europe. Martina Schmidt, director of Clear Channel Outdoor Smartbike Programs, emphasized to Boston officials "the importance of advertising support to guarantee the longevity of the program." She's skeptical that user fees can cover all the costs and says, "If Boston increased the fees to that extent that it would cover every cost and also would allow for some return on the investment for us, nobody would be able to afford it."

Veolia Transportation is a French-based company that specializes in mass transit. It has transportation operations in 22 American states, including the contract to run the MBTA's commuter rail. David Boyce, who runs the company's Veloway bike-share program, says, "We see bike share as just another form of mass transportation," which can work hand in glove with mass transit, encouraging ridership by extending reach. He estimates that in a Boston system, the bikes would cost \$900 each and the stations \$4,000. Boyce is also skeptical that users could support those costs. "The fare-box recovery -- in transit, the percent of operating expense actually covered by fare revenue -- something that does 25 percent like a bike-share system is pretty good. Bus and train transit usually does 15 to 20 percent." He wants Boston to figure out the real expense of the bike-share program, what directly related revenue and sponsorships would cover, and then "sell your street furniture to the outdoor advertising company that comes back with the best proposal, whatever that may be."

Nate Kvamme, CEO of B-Cycle, a joint venture of the healthcare services company Humana, Trek bikes, and Crispin Porter + Bogusky, agrees. "I appreciated Decaux and Clear Channel's position. It makes economic sense for them to pay for the system. But the cities are giving up a substantial chunk of revenue. It's a barter system. But is that the best thing?"

B-Cycle's focus is the health benefits of bike share, particularly for Humana's 11 million members. B-Cycle started when Humana offered its Louisville employees bike share on the corporate campus and had 2,800 of them sign up. Since then, it has won projects in Denver and Miami Beach and provided a thousand bike-share bikes to the national presidential conventions. B-Cycle personalizes the experience, providing a Web interface that tells each participant the carbon offset of the rides and the calories burned.

Perhaps the most relevant analogy for bike share in Boston is the success of Zipcar. After all, in an ownership-

driven world, Zipcar proved you don't have to be a hippie to want to share. "Bike sharing and car sharing both fit into a macro trend toward a self-service lifestyle," Scott Griffith, the CEO of Zipcar, tells me in his Cambridge headquarters. "People are much more comfortable with the idea of an automated system. That came from Netflix, Amazon, and eBay. It's a behavior pattern that continues to expand. People want to be able to do it on their own, whenever they want, 24/7."

When someone joins Zipcar, his or her bike trips go up 10 percent. "So if they're doing that without bikes dispersed all around town," says Griffith, "they're going to go up a lot more than that if you put a bunch of bikes out there." In fact, in Paris, bike trips increased 68 percent when bike share began, only a third of them on Velib bikes. "People aren't going to change their lives to ride bikes," Griffith says, "but they will if they ride public transit, walk, use car sharing. There's a whole new model of smart, urban lifestyle this fits into."

Griffith does offer cautions on the question of political will: "If Menino says he wants 5,000 bikes on the streets, it has a high likelihood of happening. The problem is, Mayor Menino doesn't have a history of doing that. When I first met with Mayor Daley in Chicago, he literally pounded his fist down and turned to his chief of staff and said, 'When do I get my [expletive] Zipcars?' We just don't get that here. Bike share is an opportunity for Mayor Menino to really step up and say, 'Let's go for it.' "

"Boston's not like other major cities; we're the most European city in America," Menino says when I meet with him. "We have 300,000 college students in Boston. One out of three Bostonians is 20 to 34. No other city can say that. We will follow Paris's lead, and Nicole will get us there." He points to Freedman, a petite woman dressed in a beige pantsuit who can't weigh 100 pounds. The mayor proudly shows me his bike, parked in the corner just behind his desk, before we sit down with a view of Faneuil Hall in front of us. "Bike share is an old thing, but it's also a new thing," he says. "I had 12 people pass me on my way to work this morning. We have all these cow paths we eventually made into streets. We have 46 miles of HarborWalk to take your bike on. This spring, we're putting miles of more bike lanes throughout the city."

Menino is optimistic. He says: "I see possibilities where other people see problems. Bike share will bring new vitality to the city of Boston. The skeptics are going to be there, but as I go about my business, I've heard from more people on this issue than any other. One of the state senators from East Boston called me up and told me, 'My God, you've got bike lanes on Bennington Street!' Isn't that wild?"

When our discussion turns to financing, the mayor says: "We love cycling. But with the financial issues I face today, I need police officers in the streets and firefighters protecting our people and teachers in the classrooms. So the economic model for bike share has to take account of those realities. These are the times you have to be creative."

Freedman says she and the mayor are open to every model. "As with all new technologies, there's an evolution," she says. But they hope the process will unveil a superior way for Boston to roll out a comprehensive regional bike-share program. "We are looking for the partnership and model that gives us real sustainability," she says.

Back in my Paris hotel room after my day of biking, I find sleep doesn't come easily. I keep thinking about whether Velib would really work in Boston. As I toss and turn, it occurs to me that the key is something Valeau told me: "Velib has changed Parisians themselves. We are known as arrogant people, but with Velib, we have shown new behaviors. Velib has made Parisians helpful and friendly."

When Menino told me he thinks Boston is the most European city in America, he meant it in the most complimentary way. But isn't it also possible that Bostonians might be viewed as European, like Parisians, because we can be, at times, cold?

On my Velib bike, I saw Paris in an entirely new way. Not just the scenery, but the people. It was almost as if, by riding one of their bikes, I became one of them. At one point, I was riding on a sidewalk when I approached two police officers and was motioned to stop. "These areas are for people," one officer said. "Please stay in the bike lanes." He seemed sincere, and I couldn't help but recall the story I heard last year about cops in Cambridge, who have issued about 1,000 tickets to bicyclists for various violations.

The most remarkable thing happened while I was stopped, staring at my map, straddling my Velib bike in front of the Grand Palais. A well-dressed older woman approached, seemingly in a hurry to get by me. She looked down and stopped in her tracks. Something shiny was on the ground between us. She bent down and picked up a thick gold ring and held it out for me to look at. "Where are you from?" she asked.

"Boston," I told her.

"You look happy," she said. "This is for you. Good luck."

I protested, feeling the woman had found the ring and it should be hers. "No," she said. "I am divorced. You take this home to your wife."

And so I do. When I get back to Boston, I find my Parisian ring is worth \$3,000. I give it to Elena, along with a bright red Hermes scarf. The ring reminds me that my trip, like Velib itself, wasn't some fairy tale I dreamed up. It was as real as the French gold now on my wife's finger. If bike share in Paris has the power to transform that city's collective personality just a little, how can anyone argue against it for Boston? ■

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