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Opinion

OPINION

The Boston bike-share success story

By Tom Keane | NOVEMBER 26, 2011

THE HUBWAY — Boston's bicycle share program — at first blush seemed one of those off-the-wall, goofy larks you'd find in cities like Portland, Ore., or San Francisco. The notion that meat-and-potatoes Tom Menino was behind it made me wonder whether those 18 years as Boston mayor had finally exacted their toll, especially when he started prattling on about this being the beginning of a new, green urban transportation system.

But now the bikes are heading inside for the winter and, taking stock of the last four months, the Hubway is starting to look less hare-brained and more like one of Menino's best ideas ever.

A bike share program is, at its most basic, just what it sounds like: City-owned bikes are scattered around downtown, available for folks to use as they wish. But the implementation of that simple idea is remarkably sophisticated. Since the program started July 28, bikes have been available at 60 (solar powered!) stations. Members of the program carry around a small fob which unlocks the bike. They then ride where they wish, docking it at a nearby station when done. Apps available on smartphones tell users where stations are and - in real time - how many bikes are available. Rides under 30 minutes are free to members. Anything longer carries a small charge.

The program's unveiling was accompanied by the usually litany of naysaying. No one would use it. Riders would get hurt. Traffic would be a mess. It was a waste of

taxpayers' money. Bikes - as happened in Paris - would be vandalized and stolen.

All wrong. The program signed up 3,620 annual members (I'm one) and attracted another 30,000 or so casual users - tourists and locals who try it for a day or two. Nicole Freedman, who heads up Boston's bicycle efforts, says that since inception there have been about 138,000 bike rides, well above initial projections. There have been no serious injuries (Freedman speculates Hubway users tend to be more cautious riders and the bikes are themselves sturdily built, including flashing lights both fore and aft.) Automobile traffic still flows as well - or as badly - as ever.

Taxpayer money? Actually, none from the city. The total bill is \$5.7 million, including the bikes and stations (which Boston now owns) as well as three years of operations. That was funded entirely by a combination of almost \$4 million in state and federal grants, a large donation from New Balance, and other sponsors and advertisers. Given ridership levels, future operations likely can be paid from user fees and sponsorships.

Despite the sorry experience Parisians had with their own bike share program, fears of mischief never materialized. For one, the Hubway requires riders use a credit card, making it pretty easy to track down would-be thieves. And aside from petty problems such as stickers defacing stations and bikes, there has been no real vandalism. Maybe we're just more civil than the French.

Still, Boston's small program is a far cry from Menino's grandiose vision of a full-blown transportation system. Right now the stations are mostly downtown. The critical need, the city acknowledges, is to roll out stations all over Boston as well as in neighboring Brookline, Cambridge, and Somerville. Boston still needs more and better bike lanes to accommodate the hordes it someday hopes to see on two wheels. There are operational kinks to work out too; more than once, I've found stations empty of bikes (or full - making it impossible to dock).

Even so, there are intriguing signs of what the Hubway might become. Commuters coming into North and South Stations now routinely hop on bikes to get to their offices. Tourists use it as a way to better see the sights without the wear of walking. And I personally have found that it changes things: I now readily go places I didn't.

Cars are expensive to park; subways take too long. The bike is quick and easy.

The only flaw to all of this is the weather. Not surprisingly, the Hubway closes for the winter, shutting down at the end of this month and reopening mid-March. That's yet another reason to yearn for spring.

Tom Keane writes regularly for the Globe.

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