

Bike sharing could be coming to Portland: Do you believe?

BY MARGAUX MENNESSON
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Anyone can ride a bike in Portland. That's the idea behind the proposal for a new bike sharing program aimed at increasing the number of bicycle trips



HEALTHY STREETBEAT

Bicycle
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Healthy Streetbeat is a monthly column for Street Roots written by the Bicycle Transportation Alliance (BTA). Our contributors are Rob Sadowsky, executive director, and Margaux Mennesson, communications director.

and providing low-cost access to bikes for residents and visitors in the central city. Bike sharing would open up the central city to new riders as well as people

who otherwise may not own or be able to ride a bike because of limited mobility, commute distance or financial barriers.

If funding comes through for city's proposal, bikes would provide a convenient, low-cost connection between transit hubs in the central city and inner eastside. The network would include 740 bikes at 74 kiosks located throughout the downtown and inner eastside commercial districts, mimicking the streetcar loop.

Last week, the chair of Portland Streetcar Inc, Michael Powell (owner of Powell's Books) wrote a letter to the U.S. Department of Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood urging the federal support of a bike-sharing program in the central city.

Powell wrote in the letter:

"Bike share systems have proven successful at increasing the number of

bicycle trips taken in cities across the globe by providing access to bicycles at a low cost, increasing the visibility and presence of bicycles on downtown streets, and providing a transportation option that connects residents, employees, and tourists to work, home, transit and attractions."

The letter shows that Portland has private backers lined up to support a program that is up and running in Europe and many larger cities in North America, including Chicago, Minneapolis, Montreal, Boston, and coming soon to New York City.

It means that leaders are rethinking the definition of transit and getting creative about ways to expand options to more people.

In April, Portland Streetcar manager Rick Gustafson suggested that if TriMet eliminates Fareless Square, bike sharing could provide free or low-cost transit options to the central city (not just downtown) while helping the city achieve climate and transportation goals laid out in the Portland Plan.

The city of Portland estimates that in the first 12 months of the program, it will generate 500,000 bicycle trips and serve up to 50,000 households, 40 percent of which are low-income.

The program, which would be funded through a mix of public and private financing, creates opportunities for business and the tourism industry. In Portland and other cities considering bike sharing, the market is growing for "mobility-driven" business models in which a private backer

develops the operation, often partnering with a mobility-focused nonprofit, geared toward attracting more riders.

This type of model has proved more sustainable than the advertising-driven model, which comes with the risk of lost revenue if advertising space goes unoccupied.

Riders use their credit or debit card to unlock a bike. The first half hour is free; return the bike to any bike share station in the system within 30 minutes and your card won't be charged. If you keep the bike out longer, you'll be charged for every 30-minute increment after the first. Most bike-share programs also offer users the option of signing up for a monthly or annual pass.

It's easy, it's affordable, and it will convert even the nonbelievers.

In 2008, I took a trip to Paris to visit family members and had a chance to try the first-generation Vélib program. The silver bikes were dazzling, and they seemed to be everywhere – a bike station on every corner and a bike for everyone who wanted to ride.

For all the scrutiny Vélib has come under – the system is based on the old advertising-driven model as opposed to the newer mobility-driven model; theft has been a problem; the kiosks could not read the magnetic strip in American credit cards – what I saw reflected in all those shiny silver bikes was a message that said, "Yes, anyone can ride a bike here."

I believed it.

It's time for Portland to share that message with the world.

Moving on: Life and family beckon from Chicago

An open letter to friends at Street Roots, KBOO, prisoners and their loved ones, and all the folks who support issues of concern that have become my focus for the more than 20 years that I have lived in Portland:

FROM THE DESK OF Ruth Kovacs



Ruth Kovacs is a Portland activist, former teacher and the host of Prison Pipeline on KBOO, 90.7 fm. She writes regularly about the issues surrounding the millions of individuals and families affected by the U.S. prison system.

Early in my days of activism, I heard a story that has stuck with me for many years. It takes place in the days of The Roman Empire, when the rich had slaves, and the poor (or the prisoners taken during conquests) were the slaves. There was no middle class. If you were not rich (and a slave owner) or a slave, you were from the poor working class – whether it be as farmers, struggling to live off the land, exploited by high taxes, or in a service position where you were overworked and underpaid, and exploited by high taxes.

The period during which the story takes place, was a society of the "haves" and the "have nots" which, at the time, reminded me of life in the United States. And although there was a middle class, it always seemed to me that the wealthiest of the middle class were "rich" and the folks who saw their bank accounts go down to zero every month as the struggled on salaries that were within a few dollars of their budget, seemed "poor."

Many of us thought we had a good year if we could get into an old car and drive away from the city to a cabin in the woods for a week of fishing, escaping into the fantasy of lives portrayed in movies and television. The so-called middle class families that were portrayed wallowed in the joy of family love, which they believed was more valuable than the material things they could not afford.

The story was about the slaves in Rome who could no longer bear their oppression and figured out that if they united, they could revolt and even if it cost the lives of some, those who could survive would find freedom and peace. Such a life would bring

the reunion of families and it would not matter if they did not attain the possession of the luxuries of the elite.

But their plan was discovered and the council of the royal powers met to decide what should be done to prevent such an outrageous revolution.

"Brand the slaves with an owners crest, so we will always know where they belong," said some. "Force them to wear armbands that will be the symbol, easily recognized, of their enslavement," said others.

Finally, the wisest old men of the council said, "No, if we do that, it will be easier for them to find each other and organize. Let them imagine that they are the only ones with these ideas. Instead, work them harder, feed them less and beat them more. Then they will not have the time or the strength to organize, and these foolish thoughts will disappear."

And so the uprising of the slaves never happened.

As years went by, I often would feel so very much alone as I pursued a way to change the oppression of the middle class and the poor. But the story would remind me that the oppressors didn't want me to know how many comrades and supporters surrounded me. So I would talk to, write to, and listen to others, and discovered that I was not alone. Knowing that gave me strength to continue to work for a country that provided for the needs of all instead of just a few. It helped me keep my values and priorities in place. I put my trust for survival into the hands of my family and friends – and they never let me down.

Recently, I've made some decisions that will significantly change my life. I'm going back home to Chicago because my family needs me. My 84-year-old sister has poor health and needs someone to live with her. When we are together, we laugh (and sometimes cry) a lot. We give each other strength, and the many years of bonding provide an understanding of what was and is. We share a love of family, music and life.

In Chicago, four generations of my family frequently celebrate holidays, birthdays,

weddings, births, graduations and the lives of those who pass. Since 1965, I have visited Chicago about once a year to be a part of these very special events. I plan to bring my computer and grand piano and I'll be able to devote much time to writing. Those who know me well are happy for me because they have been listening to stories and seeing pictures of my loved ones for many years. I hope the wonderful folks in Portland will understand that I am not leaving them, but going home.

But as I leave Portland, and plan my goodbyes, I realize how very fine the family and friends that I have here are and that they have been my greatest treasures. I sincerely hope that everyone I have ever encountered knows how much I have appreciated them. But more importantly, I hope they know about each other. Once I learned that I was not alone, I knew that none of us is alone.

After living in Portland for more than 20 years, this is what I believe:

Love and support from family and friends gives me strength.

We are all sisters and brothers. This is the Oneness Of Man.

Those who have gone before me give me courage.

My mistakes teach me and help me understand others.

My pain and sorrow has given me compassion.

My frugal life style teaches me values.

My music soothes my soul.

My age gives me urgency to do it now.

As long as I wonder why, I will continue to learn.

As long as I teach I will continue to learn.

As long as I continue to learn, I will grow.

As long as I give, I will receive.

Thank you, my teachers, my strength and my courage.

With warmest wishes to Portland friends and family,

You will all be in my heart forever. Thank you.

Ruth has supported Street Roots for eight years, as a volunteer, a columnist, a copyeditor and a board member. All of us at Street Roots will miss her generosity, wisdom and commitment to the causes of social justice and prison reform. Thank you, Ruth.