



A handsome cab and a bicycle rider make their way along the road in Central Park in New York



## European-style bike-sharing programs head to US

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WASHINGTON (AFP) — American cities, eager for greener solutions to urban congestion, are rushing to set up bicycle-sharing programs similar to those launched in Europe in recent years.

The US capital of Washington will likely be the first in the nation to offer two-wheeled transport at various locations for a nominal fee, under a deal with advertising giant Clear Channel Outdoor.

San Francisco has reached a deal for a similar program with Clear Channel, while other cities including New York, Chicago and Portland, Oregon, are studying bike options.

"There is a lot of interest in the US, and 2008 is going to be a very big year for bicycle programs," said Paul DeMaio, a consultant to several municipalities on bike programs.

DeMaio said the highly touted 'Velib' program launched in July in Paris — its name a contraction of the French words "velo" (bike) and "liberte" (freedom) — drew attention to bicycle programs and spawned interest around the globe, from Montreal to Beijing.

Jim Sebastian, pedestrian and bicycle coordinator for the US capital's transportation department, said Washington has been studying the notion of bicycle sharing for several years, before most of the programs were launched in Europe.

"When we put the contract out to bid, there were no bikes in Paris or other European cities, so we didn't know the potential, and we still don't," Sebastian said.

About 120 bicycles will be deployed in the first phase of the Washington program at 10 locations around the city. Details such as costs for usage and membership have yet to be announced. The launch date has not yet been set but is likely to be in March or April of 2008, according to Sebastian.

"One of our main goals is to provide as many transportation options as possible and reduce the level of congestion, especially downtown," he said.

Martina Schmidt, president of Clear Channel unit Adshel, said the company is in the process of setting up programs in Washington and San Francisco modeled on similar ones it operates in Barcelona, Stockholm, Oslo, and Rennes, France.

As in most of the European programs, the costs of the bicycles are offset by revenues from advertising at bus shelters and other "outdoor furniture."

Schmidt says this is a win-win proposition for most cities.

"Based on the experience in Europe, cities see that traffic is congested and everyone is looking for more environmentally friendly modes of transportation," she said.

Schmidt said Clear Channel will be using a "sturdy" bike built for these purposes, which can be adapted to people of various heights. It has some special features including a small front wheel that makes it more maneuverable, but also quirky enough to discourage theft. They will also have automatic lighting for night riding.

The bikes will be locked into docking stations that will be opened with special cards for members.

Sebastian said Washington officials will encourage riders to bring helmets and offer an optional safety course for cyclists, in an effort to overcome fears about the dangers of urban cycling.

Chicago meanwhile is studying two proposals, from France-based JC Decaux — which operates the Paris system — and London-based OYBike. Mayor Richard Daley has expressed strong interest in a bicycle program, having viewed the Paris system.

"Mayor Daley's vision is to make Chicago the most bicycle-friendly city in the United States," said Ben Gomberg, bicycle program coordinator for the city.

"In Chicago, almost 60 percent of all trips by city residents are three miles (nearly five kilometers) or less, which are distances very suited for bicycling. That's why we're interested."

Additionally, Gomberg said Chicago is flat and relatively compact compared to many US cities, making cycling easier. He said city officials see many advantages to the program including improving physical fitness and reducing pollution.

DeMaio said there is vast potential for bicycle programs in the US.

"I think it's going to be amazing how fast bike-sharing grows in North America; there are so many great uses for this in cities and university campuses -- it's limitless," he said.

"With increased attention to global warming and the price of gasoline above three dollars a gallon, this is the right time for this form of transit."

DeMaio, in a research paper for George Mason University, said the notion of bike sharing has been around for a long time but that older programs failed because the bicycles were stolen or vandalized. New technology for securing bikes and keeping track of customer usage may make the new-generation programs more sustainable.

He said the latest craze is fueled by advertising companies that offer the bikes as part of a deal with cities, but that this may not work in smaller or more sparsely populated municipalities.

Even without advertising, some programs may be viable if the cities fund them, he said. DeMaio is a consultant in Arlington, Virginia, where "we are considering a model where local government provides the service, like bus service and other mass transit."