

Feds offer Fresno help planning bike-share system

By Ellie Silverman, Bee Washington bureau
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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will help Fresno plan a bike-share system to improve air quality and offer an inexpensive method of transportation as part of the Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities program.

Besides Fresno, the program awarded grants to 21 other communities out of more than 100 applicants to help them develop programs that address local needs. Fresno received the program's Bikeshare Planning Tool, which includes planning a bike-share system for the city and California State University, Fresno.

The university and city officials sent the application letter to the EPA, citing the more than 23,000 students and 2,000 employees at Fresno State who could benefit.

Thomas Gaffery, Fresno State parking and transportation manager, said a bike-share system would provide an alternative means of transportation in a city where 28.9 percent of residents live below the poverty line, compared with 15.9% in the state as a whole. In addition, about 58 percent of students at the university received Pell Grants for the 2011-12 academic year, meaning a majority of the student body lives below the poverty line.

The bike-share program would likely feature bikes that can be checked in and out of stations on campus by several different people each day, Gaffery said.

Details are slim because the grant is not a financial award, but comes in the form of expertise from the EPA or its consultants, who will help Fresno create the program.

The goal is to make it more convenient for students to take transportation other than cars — namely buses, Gaffery said. For example, a student who takes a bus to Cedar Avenue to get to a class in the Science II building on the east side of campus still has a long walk.

"That's three-quarters of a mile," he said. "Rather than walk, you can pick up one of these bike shares at the bus stop and ride it."

As soon as that bike is checked into a station on campus, it will be available for others to check out. Just how many stations and where they will be is yet to be worked out.

Similar programs are popular around the U.S. and the world. In Washington, D.C., for instance, Capital Bikeshare has more than 2,500 bicycles at more than 300 stations in the metro area. Users "join" the program using a bank card. The first 30 minutes of each ride is free, then there is a fee for each additional 30 minutes of use.

In an effort to encourage bike riding, Fresno State has recently installed three "bike barns," secure, fenced parking for bikes that students enter using their ID cards.

The bike-share program will be centered at Fresno State and include surrounding neighborhoods where less than 20% of families have cars, Gaffery said. Once the bike share gets off the ground, it can be expanded to other neighborhoods in Fresno.

"For the folks that live below the poverty line, they will be able to access the transit and the bike-share at a cost they can actually afford, as opposed to the cost to have a car," Gaffery said. "We know that we have a demand for students that want some convenient access to bike on campus."

The American Lung Association identified Fresno as having some of the worst air quality in the nation, which Gil Harootunian, director of university initiatives, said was among the reasons the university and city wanted to apply.

“We need to really develop public transportation. It’s car culture up here,” Harootunian said. “The city and the county and the university are really coming together to improve the air quality in the area.”

Fresno has had bike-share programs in the past. The Rotary Club of Fresno started a Yellow Bike program in 1996 to encourage neighborliness and honesty. At its height, more than 450 bicycles were spread around town from Roeding Park to Woodward Park. But many of those bikes fell victim to thefts and vandalism.

Rotary member and program founder Jim Burgess said in an October 1997 interview, “You can’t steal these bikes because they’re free ... but many of them are missing.”

The Rotary program ended in 2000 and the remaining bikes moved to Fresno State in 2001 for the campus’ Red Bike program. It allowed students to check out reconditioned bicycles for a semester, with the only cost a \$15 refundable deposit on a Kryptonite bicycle lock, plus a \$5 rental fee for the lock.

But the university was basically renting bikes to students, Gaffery said. The program ended because it wasn’t popular, as students preferred to own their own bikes.

The bicycles were provided free through an agreement with Pleasant Valley State Prison in Coalinga, where inmates refurbished used bicycles and donated them to bike projects in Valley communities.

Although the prison doesn’t provide bikes for Fresno State anymore, its prisoners continue to refurbish bikes. Law-enforcement agencies will bring in old bikes — often stolen ones — that are fixed up and later given away by the agencies to their local communities, said Lt. Ryan Anderson.

Bike-share programs are viewed nationally as a means to introduce people to clean-air transportation alternatives. In Washington, D.C., for instance, former city planner Harriet Tregoning called the capital’s program “a gateway drug” to bicycling. Tregoning’s only caution: Safety is a concern for the many first-time riders who use such a program.

About 130 communities in 41 states have received services through the Building Blocks program — a partnership among the EPA, HUD and the U.S. Department of Transportation — since 2011. EPA officials will hold one- to two-day workshops in each city from February to July to address environmental, housing and transportation benefits each Building Blocks program tool could provide.

“When communities get together, they are thinking about what creates a healthy and sustainable community,” Tregoning said. “This program cuts across our federal agencies.”