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News

Building Owners Begin Offering Free Bike Rentals to Tenants

By Eddie Kim Mar 2, 2015



Residents at One Santa Fe embark on a Downtown group ride on Feb. 21, using bikes provided by the Arts District housing complex. One Santa Fe has 50 bikes that can be borrowed free of charge for 24 hours. Riders also get locks and helmets.

photo by Gary Leonard

DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES - Bike sharing, in which people rent two-wheelers for a short time and then return them to public racks, has taken hold across the country and around the world, including in New York City, Washington, D.C., Paris and Mexico City.

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Bike sharing in Los Angeles, however, has long dangled stubbornly just out of reach. After a failed effort to launch a program in the city in 2013, efforts are now underway to start a countywide bike share. That could bring about 1,000 bikes and 65 stations to the Central City by mid-2016 (see sidebar).

In the meantime, however, a few Central City landlords and building operators have opted to take the matter into their own hands, creating free bike sharing programs for their inhabitants. Cycling advocates say it shows a growing willingness to prioritize bicycling as a method of both transportation and recreation.

The biggest private bike fleet in Downtown sits at the recently opened One Santa Fe, the massive white-and-red residential complex on the eastern edge of the Arts District. There, tenants of the 438 apartments can check in at the concierge desk to borrow one of 50 beach cruisers, which all feature a handlebar basket, a carrier rack on the back, a beverage holder and cheery One Santa Fe branding. People are also handed a lock, key, and front and rear lights. They need to return everything within 24 hours.

The bike share is part of an overall One Santa Fe transportation plan that aims to help residents ditch the car in favor of walking, pedaling and using mass transit, said Charles Cowley, president of Cowley Real Estate Partners, which is a development partner in the \$160 million project.

The investment in the bikes — Cowley declined to give a cost, only saying that it is part of the “six-figure” transportation program — not only helps differentiate One Santa Fe from other housing projects, it also helps residents enjoy the neighborhood and surrounding areas more conveniently, Cowley noted.

People are using the bikes to shop and dine in the Arts District and Little Tokyo, and the 24-hour timeframe offers the option to visit a friend in other Downtown neighborhoods and stay over without worrying about returning the bike, he said.

On the flip side, building traditional parking for cars is a huge expense, he said.

“To build subterranean parking, you’re talking \$50,000-\$60,000 a space. And the most you could rent it out for is maybe \$150 a month. That’s a very bad [return on investment],” Cowley said. “To not have that space means we’re better as a mobile society and our rents can stay lower.”

Free bike rentals are also available at developer G.H. Palmer Associates’ 913-unit Lorenzo apartments near the University of Southern California. Residents can check out a bike for up to 24 hours, but need their own lock.

Providing the fleet of 30 bikes was an easy choice, as most of the tenants are students and the complex is about six blocks from the USC campus, said Lorenzo General Manager Laura Nissley. Bikes also let residents explore more freely than just using public transit allows, she said.

“We have a large population of international students that come without vehicles. So for them, it’s not just about going to campus,” Nissley said. “People can take the bikes wherever — to the Fashion District, to L.A. Live, so on. We’ll have groups that go on rides together.”

It’s not only residential complexes that are getting in on the action. The management at City National Plaza, at 515 S. Flower St., started offering bike rentals to office workers last month. The 13 bikes can be taken out for three hours and helmets and locks are provided. The initial response has been so strong that building owner Commonwealth Partners is already expanding the program, said assistant property manager Melissa Navas.

“It’s a bridge to make office life better for our tenants, by offering a way to see all the things that are out there,” Navas said. “For Downtown, that’s a great thing. All the major landlords are recognizing that the area is growing as a community.”

Improvements to Downtown’s cycling infrastructure could hasten the spread of bike rental programs and smooth the county’s rollout of regional bike sharing, said Eric Bruins, director of planning and policy at the L.A. County Bike Coalition.

There are already a number of bike lanes in Downtown, including on Spring, Main, Seventh and Olive streets. Still, he said, there is a missing ingredient. Bruins thinks the area needs more protected bike lanes, which provide either a physical barrier or a wide painted buffer between the cyclist and cars.

“We see these in other cities, and they make people feel more comfortable biking,” Bruins said. “With Downtown becoming more family-friendly, we need to make sure bike infrastructure accommodates everyone.”

More rental programs could come as building owners start to see the value that investing in cycling can bring. While it’s tough to quantify how much free bikes improve a project’s bottom line, One Santa Fe’s Cowley said that close evaluation at the Arts District complex showed him it was an obvious win-win.

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