

START adds bicycles in Jackson downtown

By Erika Dahlby | Posted: Wednesday, May 3, 2017 4:30 am

Jack Koehler sent an email Tuesday to START Bike's alpha testers saying it's "time to ride."

Bright turquoise bikes have hit the streets, and the BCycle app is turned on. All that's left is for the people of Jackson to test the system, said Koehler, the program director at Friends of Pathways.

START Bike is the newest addition to Jackson's transit system, owned by START and managed by Friends of Pathways.

It's a bike-share program that uses smart bikes from BCycle, which have no need for clunky kiosks. Instead everything is powered by a touchscreen on the bike and an app on your smartphone. Koehler likes to call them "free range" bicycles.

"All of the electronics — the tracking, the computer hardware that used to be on the stations — is now on the bicycle," he said.

The technology is all new. Even for BCycle. Jackson is the beta testing ground, and this summer is the field trial. The equipment is still being developed, including the mobile app and the firmware on the bike.

"It's all being developed right now in real time," Koehler said. "This is the first time these bikes and the electronics are seeing the light of day."

The field trial is slowly being opened to more people, but it's starting off slow to give developers time to fix bugs.

"This is a chance for us to collaborate with BCycle to help them really get their product honed and finished," Koehler said. "Then we get the first system once that process is complete."

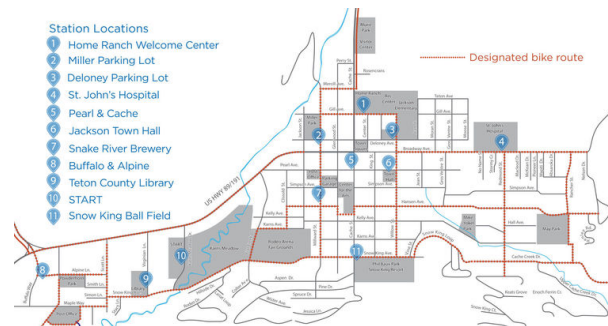
The field trial will last through the summer, and come September the turquoise bikes will be replaced with permanent white smartbikes. Stands that hold 10 smartbikes will be set up throughout town.

People will be able to leave the bike anywhere in town because of the GPS tracking.

The only things you need to participate in the field trial are a smartphone, a debit or credit card and \$5.

"We bill you \$5 to become a beta tester," Koehler said. "But we're only charging you so we can test the payment system."

That will get you 30 minutes of unlimited use on the bikes every day this summer. Each minute past that will cost 10 cents.



Bike Share

The BCycle app is not yet available in iOS or Android app stores. Instead if people want to participate they have to follow a set of instructions to download the app. See the box on page 15A to find out how to sign up and participate in the field trial.

Just because the process takes a few more steps doesn't mean that it's only for a select few. Koehler said that anyone who can find their way to StartBikeJH.com can use it.

"There won't be any filter on who can use it," he said. "We would actually love visitors to use the bikes."

There is no "normal" designation for how bike-share programs are owned and operated. In New York City it's a privately owned system. In Aspen, Colorado, it's owned by a nonprofit that receives funds from public transit.

In Jackson the decision was made to have START own the system with support from Friends of Pathways.

"We wanted to integrate it as tightly as possible," Koehler said.

Koehler hopes that the system will encourage commuters to take the bus and use the bike system for errands once in town, instead of driving a car over Teton Pass or up Snake River canyon. It has the capability to be integrated with the public transit fee system.

Friends of Pathways was chosen to operate the program because the organization has expertise with bikes — shuttling bikes around, troubleshooting questions and dealing with technical issues — and because it has worked on the project for so long.

"We're excited to work with Friends of Pathways to get this going," said START Executive Director Darren Brugmann. "It's been a while in the making."

Seven years to be exact, Koehler said.

Friends of Pathways did a feasibility study in 2011 to find out if Jackson would be good for a bike share. It proved that Jackson would be a good option, but that it lacked key infrastructure.

In 2014 Friends of Pathways led a Bicycle Network Improvement initiative for Jackson. It created an overlay, added signage and painted lanes along bike routes.

"It all fits into a big chain of putting together a system," Koehler said.

In 2015 the nonprofit did a bike share demonstration for three weeks during July and August. Three hundred eighty-two people participated and rode over 2,000 miles. It removed 891 vehicle trips and diverted 2,324 pounds of carbon dioxide, according to the Friends of Pathways 2015 annual report.

Participants said they felt safe riding on the streets and supported a full-time program.

When Friends of Pathways did the bike-share demonstration in 2015 it used a different vendor. But when it was time to put out the contract with the town BCycle stood out from the rest.

"They really looked at bike sharing as a component of transit," Koehler said.

BCycle is owned by Trek Bicycles and operates in 43 cities.

BCycle product manager Eric Fassnacht said the timing was perfect for Jackson to become the beta test site for the smartbikes.

“It’s exactly why we do this,” Fassnacht said. “It’s to augment transit opportunities for towns and help solve problems with congestion, health and pollution.”

The bikes are meant to be an integral part of the town’s transportation system, and Koehler hopes they can help people as traffic issues worsen.

“I know that we are going to have summers of more and more ridiculous traffic and more and more inconvenience to all of us just being able to move around,” Koehler said. “This is an attempt at dealing with the undesired impacts of growth through providing other solutions for mobility.

“It’s just another choice.”