

Salem set to launch free bike-share program

August 15, 2011 12:50 PM

By Justin A. Rice, Town Correspondent

Salem's new bike-share program might be considerably smaller than Boston's heralded Hubway bike-share, but it's also considerably cheaper.

In fact, it's free.

Starting at the beginning of September, residents and visitors can check out one of 26 bikes from two locations thanks to a \$25,000 state Green Communities grant. Last month Boston's program — which is modeled on similar networks in Paris, Montreal and Washington D.C. — launched with 600 bikes at 61 stations. But while New Balance Hubway customers pay \$5 a day at a self-service kiosk, Salem riders will physically check out bikes from a person for free at either the Hawthorne Hotel or at Salem State University.

Unlike Boston, the bikes will have to be returned to the hub they are checked out from. But that could change if the program expands.

"In a fully implemented program we might have open hubs where you can take it from any hub and return it to any hub," said Salem's Energy and Sustainability Manager, Paul Marquis.

If the pilot program is well received, Marquis said, Salem will consider expanding it to three more locations by the end of the year.

"I'm hoping we can get two more hubs downtown within a year and perhaps one more at Salem State," he said. "That's based on draft business plan. Those assumptions haven't been approved by everyone involved but those are numbers we've been kicking around."

Ten bikes can be checked out at the Hawthorne Hotel downtown by providing identification, a license or a credit card. Students can check out another 10 bikes at Salem State on Loring Avenue by showing their student ID card to campus police. Six reserve bikes will be rotated into the system when bikes get taken off line for repairs.

Salem State hopes to have bikes available by the first day of classes on Sept. 7.

"This is a collaboration between the city and the university and we really envision it as a great way to bring the university and the city closer together," Salem State spokeswoman Karen Cady said. "Physically we're only about a mile apart but access to bikes will make it easier for students to go back and forth and people downtown to go back and forth. So it's really exciting.

"It's going to be particular wonderful option for residents and students who don't have cars," Cady continued. "For us it helps decrease traffic and also it's an opportunity for health and fitness.

Salem Cycle on Washington Street won the contract to supply and maintain the bikes, and the shop's owner, Dan Shuman, helped design the bikes a few years ago.

“Getting a bike share in Salem is great,” he said. “It means the community is in support of it. It means more bike racks and lanes will be in the city and hopefully we can start to educate drivers about cyclists’ rights and the rules of the road. Cyclists have rights as well as drivers.”

Shuman, who also chairs the Salem's Bike Path Committee, said the bikes are similar to the ones used in the Hubway program but unlike the Hubway bikes have a full rack on the back with an option to buy a basket that hooks onto it.

“Ours aren’t quite as clunky [as Boston’s] but they are a step-through frame like the [Hubway],” he said, referring to the design that prevents riders from getting grease on their pants.

Shuman also said the bike-share will encourage residents to use the city’s recently installed bike lanes and off-road bike path.

“We have plans to expand the bike path as well,” he said. “The more we can get people biking instead of using cars the better. I’m all for getting more people on bikes. I proposed to my fiancé with a bike instead of a ring.”