



Jens Raffelson stands outside Rydjour Bike Shop with one of the donated bikes that will be converted for the Red Bike program in Austin. The bikes will be turned into single-speed bikes and painted red. Eric Johnson/photodesk@austindailyherald.com



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Pedaling in the red; Austin's Red Bike program shifting into high gear as it speeds forward

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By Jason Schoonover and Jenae Hackensmith

By next spring, leaders of the Vision 2020 Bike/Walk Trail Committee and Red Bike organizers hope to see Austin dotted with red bikes.

“Our goal is to get 60 bicycles,” Chairman of the Vision 2020 Bike/Walk Trail Committee Steve Kime said. “And the plan is to work on those over the winter, prepare them, get them painted red, and we hope to roll out next spring.”

Organizers are working with the city of Austin to create the Red Bike program, where residents can borrow a designated bike from the city free of charge any time they want. They hope to get many of the bikes through donations and are still calling for donations for single-speed adult bikes, which can be dropped off at Rydjor Bike, 219 North Main Street, through the end of the month. Cash donations are also encouraged to help offset program costs. Checks can be mailed to the Austin Area Foundation at 110 1st Ave SE, Austin, MN 55912, and marked for the Red Bike program.

The idea came after Kime read about similar bike

Bikes will be gathered through donations, police forfeitures and other means. Over the winter, Rydjor will lead the charge to get the bikes ready for the program. Rydjor will strip them down and send them to Riverland Community College, where the auto body department will paint the frames red. They'll then be brought back to Rydjor for repairs to get them in good working order.

“It's definitely going to require a lot of labor and man-hours to do this,” Raffelson said.

The bikes will then be stationed around town in designated racks for anyone to borrow.



Some older bikes donated for the Red Bike program hang with Rydjor's other stored bikes in the basement of the business. Eric Johnson/photodesk@austindailyherald.com

Thus far, donations have been slow going at Rydjor. Manger Jens Raffelson said they've gotten five or six donated bikes, but two of those likely in too poor of conditions to be used in the program.

“It's been pretty slow as far as getting bikes in,” he said.

With such a new program, he said they're going to need to see if it will work through donations only. If donations don't pick up, they could ask for multi-speed bikes that Rydjor would retool as single-speed bikes, and Raffelson said they may be able to take impounded bikes that the Austin Police Department would otherwise sell at auction. One-speed bikes were chosen for the program because of the simpler maintenance, according to Raffelson. There's fewer parts to break down or rust, which will be important since the bikes will be stored outdoors. Plus, he noted Austin is flat enough that hills shouldn't be a major problem. The bikes will only feature pedal brakes, not hand brakes.

The Red Bike program will likely require a lot of experimenting, according to Raffelson.

“I hope it'll work out, there's going to be trial and error with it,” he said.

Kime said starting the program has been a learning experience with much discussion between organizers in Austin and leaders in Willmar, which has a similar Yellow Bike program.

“We have had a conference call and discussions with the folks at Willmar and kind of got some input, learned some things about how they went about it, how it's been going over summer,” Kime said. “It's been very helpful to have their input and insight in how it's been going in Willmar for them.”

Kime said there were a few expected issues, such as some bikes missing and some needing repairs after the program started, but overall

leaders in Willmar thought it was a good program for the community.

“We took that away and hopefully it will be a very positive thing for our community as well,” Kime said.

Raffelson said Willmar started with 80 bikes in their fleet, but about 20 percent have been lost or misplaced. Since the program will work on the honor system, those issues are a concern.

“That’s our biggest concern is people not returning the bikes to the designated racks or vandalism,” he said.

Kime hopes the program will make bicycles more accessible for community members and promote bikes to fit with the goal of being a “bike friendly community.”

“I think it’s just another way to promote bicycling, healthy living and actually give people an opportunity to [bike] if they don’t own a bike, or don’t have it with them, or just want to go for a bicycle ride during their lunch hour.”

Organizers have identified 11 different areas around town to place bike racks, which will also be bright red. Kime hopes the areas will meet the needs of community bike riders all over Austin. Bikes can be used from one rack, and ideally returned to the same rack when the cyclist is finished but can also be returned to another red bike rack.

“Ride, respect, return,” Kime said. “We hope people will use the bikes, respect them and take care of them, and then return them when they’re done.”

He said one community member who lives outside of town already told Kime they hope to come into Austin and ride the bikes around town. Kime was excited to hear that and hopes to hear more success stories once the program starts.

“The hope is that it will open up another way for people to, I think, get out and about on bicycles,” he said. “And we have a good trail system.”

Kime said both Rydjour Bike Shop and the Austin Police Department have been great partnerships for the program, as representatives from both have attended meetings and given good ideas and suggestions.

“Just a great partnership I think,” he said.

Raffelson is also hopeful for the program’s success.

“If it works out good, I think it will be awesome for the community,” he said.

Becoming bike friendly

Earlier this year, Austin learned it was close to the Bike Friendly City designation after representatives from various bicycling organizations gave Vision 2020 volunteers a practice test.

Austin scored quite high in the League of Bicyclists’ five categories: encouragement, education, enforcement, evaluation and planning, and engineering.

Though the Bike/Walk Trail Committee hadn’t initially set out for a designation, Kime said the prestigious ranking was a logical step forward. Only 15 cities in Minnesota are considered Bike Friendly Cities.

Vision 2020 plans to work with state bicycling organizations to prepare its application, which could be sent next February. The city of Austin is expected to be the legal entity submitting the Bike Friendly City application, while a grant from the State Health Improvement Program will cover the \$5,000 application fee.

Locations red bike racks will be placed in Austin.

1. Near hotels including the Holiday Inn and AmericInn
2. Ankeny’s mini mart gas station
3. Bremer Bank
4. Texaco gas station
5. Austin Public Library

- 6. East Side Lake main parking area
- 7. Wescott area
- 8. Near the SPAM Museum
- 9. Near Ellis Middle School and I.J. Holton Intermediate School
- 10. Kaufman Park
- 11. Casey's gas station

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